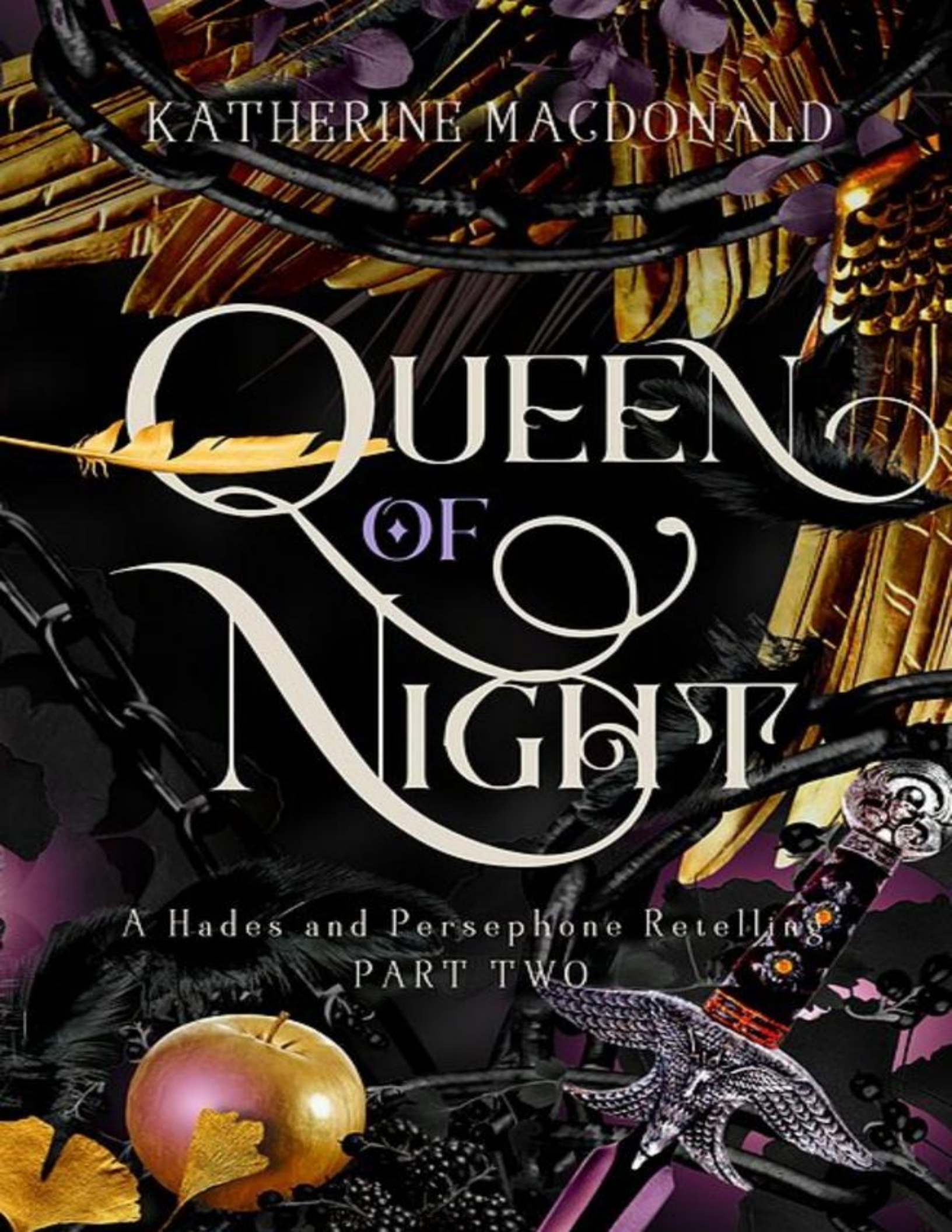
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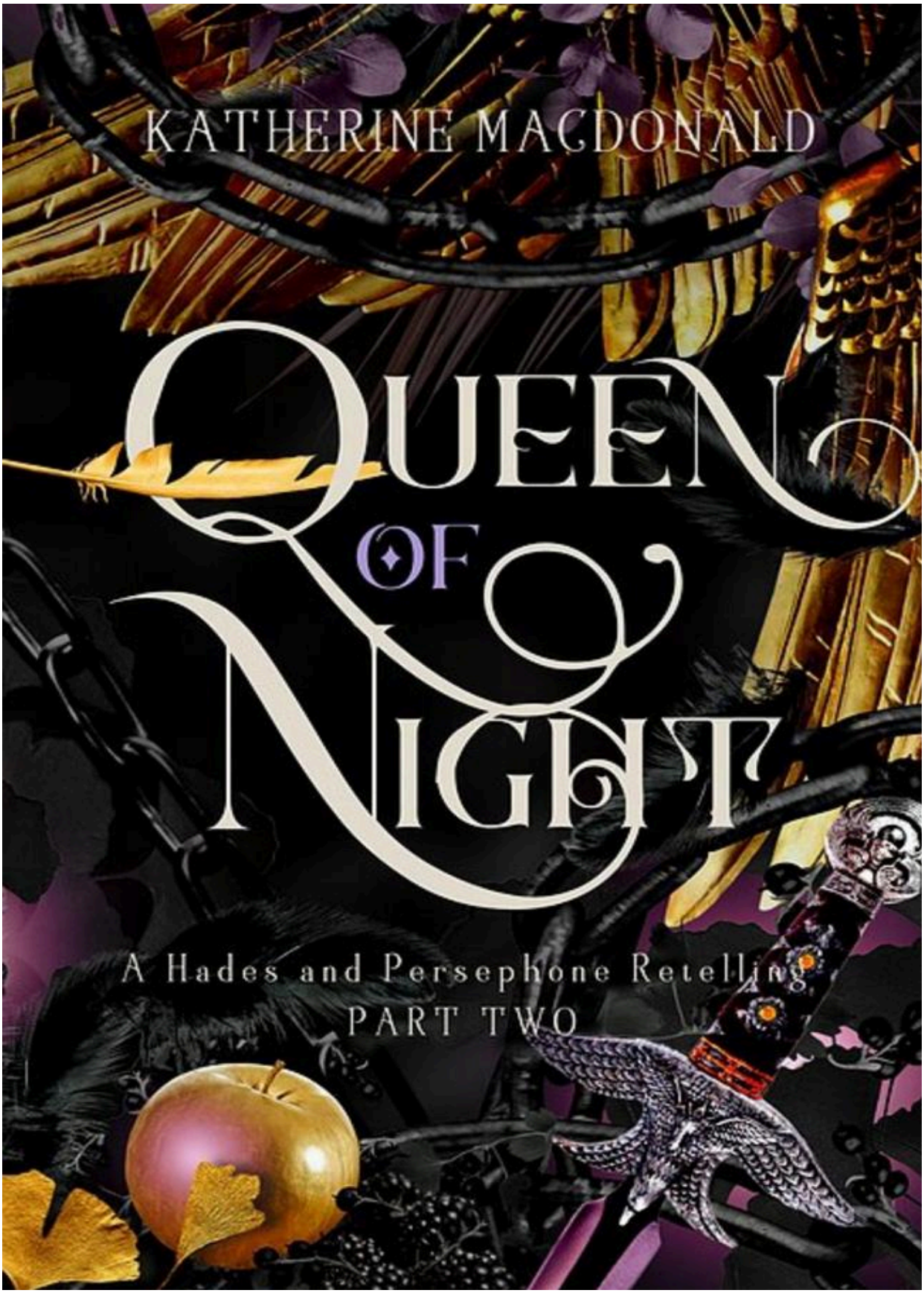
QUEEN OF NIGHT
A Hades and Persephone Retelling
PART TWO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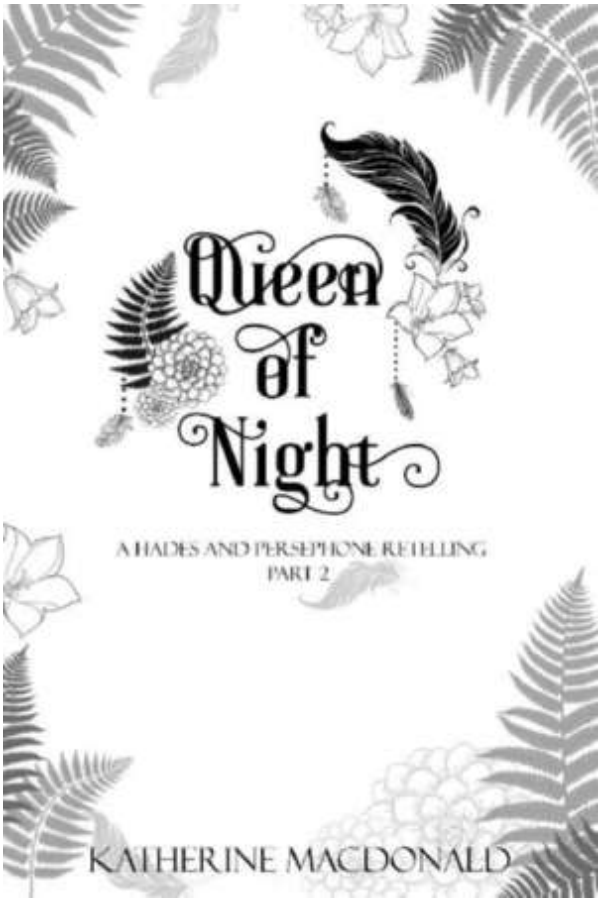
Queen of Night
A HADES AND PERSEPHONE RETELLING
PART 2
KATHERINE MACDONALD

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About The Author
Coming August 2021:
Untitled

Sing me no songs of daylight,
For the sun is the enemy of lovers
Sing instead of shadows and darkness,
And memories of midnight

—Sappho—

PART
I

It was almost midnight and the party was only just beginning. Luliver was hiding under the tables. He found this the best place to be at revels, especially when the drinking began in earnest. If no one could find him, there was no chance he'd be forced into participating in any of the theatrics or whatever his brother Zeron decided passed for entertainment. Better still, he wouldn't be forced to *become* the entertainment.

"My little brother is very fast these days. Shall we see if he can dodge a spear?"

"How much wine do you suppose he can handle now?"

"Bring forth one of the ensorcelled mortals, and let's see if he can best him in a fight."

Zeron's games were never fun, but at least Mother laughed when he took part. And if he tried his hardest, she wouldn't visit his rooms afterwards and leave another mark of her displeasure on his back.

He had a fair few, now. Scars that would never fade. He couldn't actually remember what a back was supposed to look like without them. He couldn't feel them any more, but he knew they were there. One day, when he was old enough, he would cover them up.

Until then, he was going to do his best not to get any more. If that meant hiding under a table all night, so be it.

Unfortunately, he was still hungry, so he chanced scurrying out to grab something off one of the golden plates.

A hand caught his. Luliver froze, certain it was Zeron come to force him to join the party, but although the eyes boring into him were the same ice-blue as Zeron's, the face was not his.

Father.

As the reigning lord of the Underworld, Hades XII did not tend to visit Olympus often. He was bound by law to stay within the pocket realms of faerie, save twice a year when he was free to wander as he chose. That law should not have forbidden him from coming to Olympus, but they'd still

only met a few times before in his entire life. Luliver couldn't remember when they'd last spoke.

"I thought we might have had a stray demon in our midst," said Hades coolly. "Instead, I discover my own son crawling under the tables like an urchin. What are you doing, child?"

Luliver swallowed, searching for something that wasn't the full truth, but he couldn't find it. "Hiding," he said.

"Hiding?" Hades raised a dark eyebrow. "From who?"

He didn't want to admit he was hiding from his brother, didn't want to have to explain how scared and weak and useless he was, so he answered with a statement instead. "I don't like parties."

Hades chuckled. "Me neither."

"Then why are you here?"

The light in Hades' eyes wavered. "I have come to seek a beautiful woman," he said, in a tone that spoke of other things. "And I do not mean your mother."

"Mother's beautiful," said Luliver stubbornly, for he knew the beauty of the faerie queen was unparalleled, and it felt disloyal not to mention it.

"That she is," Hades continued. "At least outwardly."

Luliver wasn't entirely sure what that meant, or what he was supposed to say. "Can I go now?" he asked instead.

"Back under the tables, you mean?"

"Yes."

"Going to tell me who you're hiding from?"

"No."

Hades waved his hand dismissively. Luliver seized one of the golden apples and a slice of blue-veined cheese before scurrying back under the table. He watched Hades' silver-tipped boots moving to the other side of the room, to converse with someone in glittering golden slippers and a long lavender gown. They stood that way for a long time.

Eventually, the golden slippers moved towards the table. He heard the sound of a plate banging and an apple thudded to the floor.

A slender, olive-skinned hand reached under the table to grab it, and a face appeared with it. It was a pleasant face, warm and bright, with violet eyes and brown curls elaborately braided beneath a laurel of wheat.

Emetria, Lady of Agriculture.

"Hello," she said softly. "Luliver, isn't it?"

He'd met her many times before but never spoken to her at great length. He was a little surprised she was speaking to him now. Adults generally ignored him unless Zeron shoved him into the spotlight.

"Yes," he said, not sure of what else he was supposed to say.

"It's nice and quiet under here. Do you mind if I join you?"

Luliver didn't really *want* her to join him. He was certain it must be some kind of trick, despite her smile. But he knew it would be rude to refuse, and maybe she wanted him to say that he minded. Maybe that was the trick, the lead-up to some ridicule.

"You can join," he said, as neutrally as he could manage.

Emetria smiled again, gathering up her skirts and sliding onto the white marble with him. She drew a piece of wheat from her sleeve and started to weave it into the shape of a three-headed dog. She was using magic to speed up the process, but the skill was still there.

"How are you doing that?" he asked.

"A little skill I picked up from the mortal realm."

"You've been there?"

"I spent entire decades in my youth living amongst them."

"But… why?"

Mother and Zeron both spoke of mortals as if they were little more than pests, animals to be enscorcelled for their amusement. He couldn't imagine either of them wanting to live amongst them, any more than he could imagine them living in a stable.

"Mortals have many things to teach us," she explained, "if we look close enough. *Everyone* has something to teach us."

He supposed this was true. Zeron and Mother were always going on about lessons he had to learn, although he'd yet to like any of them. He wondered what Emetria would teach him, if he paid attention. He wondered what the mortals could show him, too.

"What's the mortal world like?" he asked. No one, not in two decades, had given him much of an answer. The mortal world was something he had only ever seen in mirrors, or read about in books.

Emetria paused for a moment. "Different yet exactly the same," she said. "Their lives are shorter, but everything is slower for them. They take their time with a lot of things. There's much beauty in their world, but ugliness too."

"And what are *they* like?" He'd only ever seen the glamoured ones, rarely ever spoken to them. There was an emptiness to their eyes, their

voices, their expressions. There was little point in speaking with them.

Emetria swallowed. “Like us,” she said. “Almost exactly. They feel everything that we do.”

Luliver’s stomach turned, remembering how he’d been made to poke and prod one just a few weeks ago, Zeron insisting that the man couldn’t feel a thing, no matter his cries.

“Are you all right, Luliver?”

Luliver wasn’t sure he’d ever been able to answer that question truthfully, though it had been asked little in his life. “Zeron and Mother don’t like mortals,” he said instead.

“No,” Emetria said, lowering her head. “I don’t think they do.”

“Why is that?”

“We forget a lot of things when we live too long.”

Luliver didn’t know what she meant by that, but it wasn’t much of an answer.

“Would you… would you like to visit the mortal world with me some time?” Emetria asked. “I’d be quite happy to take you.”

Luliver had barely left the confines of Mount Olympus, save to visit some of the other courts. He nodded. It was the best invitation he’d had in a long time.

“I’m going in a few days, as it happens,” she continued. “The first of May. I’m going to visit an old mortal friend and his daughter. Her name is Persephone.”

*

Luliver did not expect Emetria to return. He mulled over her words. There was no promise in them, only suggestion. He assumed like most nice things that were offered to him, it would be forgotten about.

And yet Emetria was there on the 1st of May, waiting for him after breakfast. She took his hand and guided him towards the teleportation circle. He did not stop to ask her if this visit was sanctioned, if his mother knew where they were going. He was certain she would not approve, and he didn’t want to risk her ire.

“Are you ready?”

“Yes,” said Luliver, because he felt like he’d never been more ready for anything in his life. His hand trembled eagerly in hers, and he found he quite liked the feel of it, strange and foreign though it was.

They vanished in a cloud of light, materialising seconds later in a grassy glade filled with sunshine.

It was… loud. There was some low roar far away, dull and tempered. The occasional blare of a horn. A metallic smoke cluttered the air, behind the scent of freshly-mown grass and the sticky-sweet aroma of flowers.

"Where are we?" he asked.

"London, England," said Emetria. "Hyde Park, to be precise."

They left the glade, joining a path towards the sound of children laughing. There were so many people, so many colours and sights and smells. Some kind of metal jungle—a playpark, Emetria explained—rose out of the grass. It was filled with children.

He was the only child on Olympus. He'd barely spoken to others, except for the occasional visiting youth from another court. Here, there were dozens.

"Rabbits," his mother had said. "*Insects."*

But though they were bright and colourful and loud and numerous, Luliver didn't feel like they were pests. They buzzed with warmth.

A man rose from one of the benches and came towards them. He dressed in a tweed jacket, with light brown, greying hair, bespeckled and older-looking than most of the faeries in court. He waved to Emetria, offering her a nod.

Behind him was a small mortal child.

She was composed entirely of soft edges and was as unfaerie-like as it was possible to be. It wasn't that she wasn't pretty—far from it—but the fae were water and air and she was light and earth. She had chubby cheeks and rounded ears, a tiny nose with a splattering of freckles across it, and eyes the colour of woodland; half clay, half green. She wore her sugar-brown curls in two bunches at the side of her face, underneath a wide-brimmed straw hat with a pink bow.

Persephone.

She ran forward to greet him, offering him a wide, gap-toothed smile. "Hi! I'm Persephone."

He stumbled on her name, despite having been told it beforehand. It wasn't just because of its length, but because he wasn't used to speaking to people at all and he wanted her to like him. He made an utter mess of it. He waited for the sting or barb—his brother Zeron always taunted him when he couldn't say things right—but Persephone just smiled. She laughed at him, but not like the other children of the court laughed at him, or how Mother and Zeron laughed. She laughed like she was expecting him to join in.

"You can call me Sephy, if you like. Everyone does."

“I’m Luliver.”

“I’m six,” she said, rattling on. “Nearly seven! It’s my birthday next week. Seven days till seven!”

Seven. A faerie child would be barely out of swaddling clothes by then. She looked like a child closer to seventeen.

“How old are you?” she asked.

Faeries couldn’t lie, so he told her he was twenty-one. She laughed; even at nearly-seven she knew that was too old. He was taller than her. Taller than most of the children at the play park. But he was still clearly a child.

“Silly boy,” she giggled. “Never mind, you can play with me anyway. Come on!”

She dragged him away to the swings. He shot a look at Emetria, just to check it was all right, but she nodded calmly, encouraging him to go.

The breeze felt different down here in the mortal world, the sun more real despite the distance. He’d never heard so much *laughter.* All the children were nice to him. They explained the rules, let him join in, and ran around like goblins, squealing with delight. Was this normal? Did they welcome strangers into their group all the time? Was it normal how much his sides ached from laughing so much himself?

“You look hot,” Sephy said, promptly dumping her hat on his head and tying the ribbon loosely under his chin, “Don’t burn.”

It took a great deal more than sunlight for a faerie to burn. He probably should have insisted she wear it instead, but he didn’t want to give it back. He couldn’t remember the last time he was *given* something. What he had himself he’d demanded from the servants or stolen from elsewhere in the palace. It suddenly felt like everything and nothing was his, save this hat, that a thing had to be given before it was yours.

He did not want to say goodbye, even less so a few hours later when she kissed him on the cheek. Softer than sunlight but brighter than fire, he felt it left a kind of brand, more a badge than a scar, but equally impossible to remove.

“Bye, Luliver!” she grinned. “See you next week!”

Only, of course, she wouldn’t. Emetria took her aside at the end of the visit, and he saw the shimmer of glamour in her eyes when she told her to forget the meeting, but remember the day.

“And me,” he whispered desperately to himself. “Remember *me.*”

But a minute later, after Emetria moved away, her eyes glossed over him, and he knew he was gone from her memories.

He was silent all the way back home, silent through dinner, silent through the evening's revelries. He almost drifted off at the back of the ballroom, still feeling the warmth of her lips on his cheek, fingers touching his skin like he could pin the feeling to him.

Sephy would never remember giving him that kiss, but he would remember receiving it until the day he died. He vowed it.

Emetria steered him off and back to his room. She was nice, he realised, nice like Sephy. He'd never given her much thought, before. She was just another one of the adults who drifted in and out of the palace, although she often smiled at him. The others rarely did.

Her smile looked like Sephy's smile.

"Did you have a nice time?" she asked, tucking him into bed. He was too old to be tucked up in bed, really, but he found he didn't mind. No one else was going to bother.

"Yes," he said. "Per… Per—"

"Persephone."

"*Per-sef-fo-nee* was nice." He exaggerated each syllable of her name.

Emetria laughed. "I think she's a little young for you."

"She won't always be," he said sadly, already aware that soon she'd be older, that her years would race by like a flaming match book while the embers of his immortal life had only just begun to smoulder.

Emetria said nothing.

He fiddled with the brim of the hat she'd given him. "I forgot to give it back."

"I'm sure she has plenty." She fiddled with the top of his coverlet for a moment. "You understand that… she won't remember you, if you ever meet again?"

Hades understood that. He didn't understand why, much like he didn't understand why he *hated* the thought of her not knowing him, why he could feel his eyes prickling just thinking about it.

"I don't want her to forget me," he said, even though she already had, even though it was silly and pointless and he shouldn't care what one little mortal girl thought of him. All of a sudden it seemed ridiculously unfair that she would never stare up at the sky and think of him. That no one ever would.

He started to cry. He hadn't cried for years, at least not in front of anyone. His mother didn't approve of crying, and showed her disapproval in painful ways that shivered along his back.

Emetria didn't seem to disapprove. She folded her arms around him and tugged him to her chest. He wriggled for a moment, wondering if, despite her softness, this was the start of a fight, or a prank of some kind. She would not be the first adult whose gentle touch had quickly shifted to something else.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"It's a hug, Luliver. I'm hugging you."

"It's nice," he said, and coiled his fingers into her clothes. "It's warm."

Emetria stayed there until his sobs subsided, and then she kissed his head, rose from the bed, and turned towards the door.

"Emetria?"

"Yes?"

"Thank you. For taking me out today."

She smiled. "Same time next year?"

She left, and the light in his room grew soft and dark. He traced the ribbon on the hat, remembering the warmth Persephone seemed to emmit, that had spiralled under his skin when she held his hand.

Years later, looking back at that day, Luliver would wonder if he had been doomed to love that joyful little mortal girl from the moment her fingers grabbed his.

He practised her name for days afterwards. Even weeks later, when he should have forgotten, it would bubble up inside of him, rushed out like a prayer. There were plenty of times when he didn't think of her, but she appeared when things were good—because how could he fail to think of her when he was happy?—and when they were bad, because that was when he needed to remember good things most.

One day, reeling from another of his mother's punishments and finding it impossible to sleep when the pain seared across his back, he took the ribbon from the hat and wrapped it around his wrist. He rubbed the ends until they were frayed, and the pain didn't hurt so much anymore.

Despite this incident, things got a bit better on Olympus afterwards. Emetria came by a great deal, gifting him with mortal toys and mortal books, stories of other children in other worlds, of boys under the stairs and kids

turned to mice. It was in books he found that he was never really alone. In books he found his friends.

Zeron did not approve of his new hobby, and after he tore up his copy of *Black Beauty,* Luliver got very good at glamouring them to look like other things. To preserve his treasures, he had to disguise them. To be protected, they needed to be something else.

One day he glamoured worms to look like slices of meat and had them laid out on the table for Zeron's lunch in the courtyard. Zeron was furious, but he never suspected Luliver was the one who did it. He made a show of being bad at glamours to convince everyone else he was powerless. Looking weak gave him one element of protection. It was the best disguise he could give himself.

I cannot lie, but I will deceive you all.

He learnt to skate about the truth, to hide behind 'perhaps', behind 'maybe', behind questions that no one answered. He watched the adults talk, and learned the art better than any of them.

Only Emetria did not seem fooled.

Not content with merely giving him gifts, she installed herself as one of his tutors and taught him all about history. He was well versed in *their* history by now, but Emetria taught him about the mortal world too. About their wars, their customs, their cultures and people. She spoke of science and mortal philosophy. She seemed to have lived everywhere, experienced everything.

"I'd like to travel one day," he told her, thinking wistfully of white beaches, dense jungles, snowy mountaintops and ancient temples. He thought of treasure and adventure and whether Persephone wanted these things too. He'd love to go with her.

May could not come again quickly enough.

"Now remember," Emetria told him when the day finally came, "she won't remember you. You understand that, right?"

"I *know,*" he whined. "I'm not a child!"

She raised an eyebrow.

"Well, not a *little* one, anyway."

He was still gripped by a childish giddiness as they made their way across the park the following May, unable to keep still. He caught sight of Persephone with her father at one of the benches, and bolted from Emetria's side. Memory or not, she was clearly expecting someone. She turned to greet them.

Taller now, than when they'd last met. Still not quite near his height. He wondered if she'd get taller before he could, why that even mattered. She was wearing a lavender dress with matching ribbons in her hair, and two brightly-coloured plasters on her knees.

"Hi!" she said, just as brightly as the first time they met, "I'm Per—"

"Persephone," he said, pushing down his swell of pride.

Persephone blinked at him. "How did you—"

"Emetria told me your name." Not a lie, she had. A year ago. And he had thought about it almost every day since. "I'm Luliver."

"Oh," she said. "Well, nice to meet you!"

Nice to see you again.

"Want to play with me?"

More than anything else in the world.

She dragged him off towards the playground, which apparently was a pirate ship, and she a fire-breathing mermaid trying to rescue the stolen treasure on board. He was her dolphin friend.

It was ridiculous and silly and made absolutely no sense and he loved every single minute of it.

Halfway through the day, he excused himself to go and use the public restroom. Emetria was sitting on the bench with Persephone's father. He looked old, tired, with grey streaks through his brown hair. He'd smiled at Luliver when he first appeared, but there was no smile on his face now. They sat in absolute silence, with a stony quality to the air around them that suggested they'd been that way for some time.

"The boy," the man started, unaware that Luliver was listening, "is he some sibling of hers? Something else you failed to mention?"

"He isn't mine," she snapped. "He's just a boy from court. I thought it would look odd if I was caught coming here alone."

Luliver froze. He didn't like the word *just.* He didn't like the way she was speaking, as if he was just an inconvenience, an excuse. He'd never thought about why Emetria had taken him on these excursions before, why they went to meet this girl.

A sibling of hers? The man had said. How could he be Persephone's sibling?

The rest of the afternoon was harder to get through, all the questions spinning round his head.

"Are you all right?" Emetria asked on the way back. "You're very quiet."

“Persephone’s father thought I was her sibling,” he said stiffly.

Emetria froze.

“Why would he think that, when I’m faerie, and she isn’t? And why… why do you have to sneak around to visit her?”

Emetria drew a ragged breath. “Luliver—”

“Is she your daughter?”

Emetria’s breathing became almost panicked, like an animal nearing the end of a hunt. “You must not tell anyone,” she said, grasping him by the shoulders. “Swear it to me. Swear you won’t breathe a word.”

“I won’t tell anyone,” he gabbled, and then, on impulse, “Luliver Edelvard Lore.”

“What?”

“My true name,” he said. “So there is no way for me to break my word. Compel it of me.”

“You… you just gave me your true name.”

“She’s your biggest secret, isn’t she? That’s mine. You can have it. I trust you.”

He would never endanger Persephone’s life. Never. And there was no one he trusted more than Emetria, not then.

And if Emetria was surprised he knew his true name so young, that surprise was tempered by her shock at him revealing it, and her relief at his loyalty.

Her shoulders loosened. “I’m sorry,” she said.

“What for?”

“It isn’t fun, keeping secrets.”

“But… I don’t understand. Why is she a secret? And how can she be your daughter if she’s mortal—”

“Well, it’s… it’s a bit like how you look more like your father than your mother,” she explained, smoothing a lock of dark hair behind his ear.

Luliver hadn’t seen his father in a year. He couldn’t remember much about him. He was tall and dark, with eyes of flame-blue like Zeron’s. He’d never said anything cruel to him. He’d never said anything nice, either.

“Sephy takes after her father,” Emetria continued. “A lot more than she takes after me.”

“So… she’s just a normal mortal, then? She’s only going to live for a few decades and then…”

“Looks like it.”

He wasn't sure he could bear it, even then, the thought of watching her fizzle away, of the future when there would be no days in the sun. Mortal lives were so fleeting.

He knew that was more Emetria's tragedy than his, but for a moment he felt like it might be his, too.

It was going to get worse. And he couldn't stop himself.

When Persephone was nine-nearly-ten, things changed. She asked him bigger questions, like who Emetria was, where he'd come from, why her father seemed so tense and terse when Emetria was supposed to be a friend.

"I want to tell you," he said, "but I can't."

"What do you *mean,* you can't?"

Luckily perhaps for everyone, it started to rain. Or maybe Emetria made it rain to cover the questions. He was never sure of her powers.

They decided to go to the cinema instead, rather than end the day prematurely. Luliver liked this idea. He liked sitting next to Persephone in the dark. He liked the buttery smell of the popcorn and the little gasps of joy she made at regular intervals and how she clutched his arm when the Wicked Witch cackled.

He wished the old hag would cackle more.

He liked the film, too. He ought to be used to spectacles living on Olympus, but somehow there was something glorious about this film, the transition from sepia to colour, and the songs were nice. He hummed them under his breath.

The ruby slippers were pretty, too. Persephone wanted a pair.

Afterwards, they went to get ice cream at a fancy tea shop round the corner. Persephone dug into her strawberry sundae and turned to Emetria.

"You could be Auntie Em!" she exclaimed, clapping her hands together.

Emetria stiffened. Only Luliver could see how much that hurt her, how much she wanted to be so much more than her aunt.

"I'm not Auntie Em," she said, summoning a smile. "I'm more like Glinda the good witch."

Persephone laughed, and turned to Luliver. "You could be Toto, with your lovely black hair," she suggested, and reached out to stroke it.

He did not feel like Toto. He didn't feel like the Lion or the Scarecrow either, having nothing like the brains or courage either of them were rewarded with at the end. The only thing he was sure he possessed was a heart, because it was beating very rapidly against his chest.

The next year was the last year.

"She's too old to be meeting at parks," Emetria said. "And she asks too many questions."

"But you glamour her afterwards!" he insisted. "So what does it matter?"

"Luliver," said Emetria softly, "I can't."

She turned away from him, forgetting to make him promise to stay away, so when the day came, he snuck down to the mortal realm himself. No one noticed he was gone. No one ever did.

He went to the park alone.

It was a cool, misty day, and the playground was empty. He realised a flaw in his plan; that Persephone wouldn't come alone, that he had no way of getting to her. He sat on the swings and sulked, kicking the dirt beneath his feet. Was he honestly never going to see her again?

It started to rain, but he didn't want to move. He sat there as the drizzle worsened, as the people vanished from the park, scurrying for warmth and shelter.

An umbrella appeared above him, bright yellow and printed with flowers. It cut through the gloom like the sun itself, as did the smile of the girl that came with it.

"You're getting very wet," said Persephone brightly, and then frowned when she saw his face. "You look sad. Are you OK?"

Luliver didn't answer. He launched himself at her middle. He couldn't believe that she was here, that she'd come anyway, and if he didn't know how important she was to him before, he knew it better, then.

Persephone patted his back, as if complete strangers sobbing into her waist happened every week. "There, there, it's OK, want to talk about it? Dad says talking about your worries makes them smaller. Aunt Imogen says smashing something makes her feel better, but I don't like breaking things. Do you? We could find you some twigs, or something."

“I’m all right,” he said, inching back to wipe his nose. And he *was* all right, because she was there. “Want to play on the zipline?”

That time, he had to glamour her himself. He almost didn’t, but then he thought about her running home to her father and telling him about the strange boy with golden eyes. He might tell Emetria about it. And she might use his true name to stop him from seeing Persephone ever again.

He couldn’t bear the thought of that.

He’d been a fool to give Emetria his true name.

He caught Persephone’s hand, and she flashed him a twinkling smile.

“’Sephone,” he said, “I really like you.”

She beamed. “I like you, too!”

No, no, no you don’t. Not like how I like you. You never will. You can’t. But I’d rather see you once a year and hurt because of it than stop seeing you entirely and die from it.

An exaggeration, of course. He probably couldn’t speak those words. No matter how much he might feel them.

It occurred to him it didn’t have to be once a year. He was old enough now to sneak away to the mortal world as often as he liked. He only didn’t because she was the one he came to see.

He forgot about glamouring her, just for a moment.

“Can I walk you home?”

He wasn’t sure it was possible for her smile to brighten any further, but it did. She held out her hand. “Sure!”

They held hands all the way back to her home, a flat in an old Victorian building a short distance from the park. She pointed to the top, where he spotted a small roof garden stuffed with flowerpots.

“We live on the top two floors,” Persephone explained. “Just dad and me and our cat. You can come by anytime you like!”

I can’t. I can’t, I can’t, I can’t.

I will.

“Persephone,” he said, still not letting go of her hand. He caught her gaze, and let his power trickle into her. Casting glamours had never felt painful before, never caused such a tug in his chest. “You went to the park today, and you had a lovely time, but you didn’t meet anyone. No one was there.”

“No one was there,” she repeated, her gaze vacant.

He sighed. “Goodbye,” he said, and pulled back, glamour and all. He turned his back to her and drifted down the street.

“Goodbye,” she called after him.

He hesitated, just for a moment, but soon convinced himself it was merely the remains of the glamour, forcing her to echo his own words back.

Emetria may have stopped taking him to see Persephone, but she still flitted in and out of his life, never fully leaving him at the mercy of Zera. She would take him on day trips to the mortal world, from busy markets to ancient temples, to secluded swimming spots in the deepest, darkest parts of the forest.

"You can take your shirt off, you know," she said once, as he emerged from the water dripping wet. "You must be uncomfortable." Her hands reached for him as if to help him undress, but he shrugged her off, hoping she would leave it. He didn't want her to see his back, to see the lines his mother had carved there. He didn't know what she would do if she knew, but he didn't want to show her.

Sometimes, rarely, she'd take him to the Underworld.

He didn't like it there. It was dark, and the river screamed. He liked the quiet and the gardens of the palace, but everything else emanated cold. The air seemed thick with it.

His father mostly ignored him. There was no unkindness about it, but no kindness either. He was as frosty as the halls. He made some attempt to speak to him, but the words seemed to get lost in the space between them.

But he let him do whatever he liked, and he never looked disappointed or angry, so there was that, and once he let him name one of his new dogs. Luliver picked Fluffy, from one of the books that Emetria had given him, and his father laughed.

It was the first time he had ever made a parent laugh and not been ashamed or afraid.

One night, he woke up to voices in the corridor. Emetria was speaking in a rough, panicked voice. He had never heard her panicked before. It didn't sound right.

"Challenge Zera! Take him away from her."

"Challenge Zera, for one boy? Are you mad, woman?"

"Not one boy," Emetria said, with an urgency that Luliver couldn't quite pin to words. "Your *son*."

Hades sighed. “Son. Yes,” he said, as if the words pained him. “But still one boy. If I challenged her over this, we could lose everything we’re working towards.”

“But he’s your *son.* Your child. Your—”

“I am no father, or a poor one at best.”

“She’s hurting him.”

A long pause, shaky as the river and far more silent. “Has he told you this?”

“No, he won’t speak of it, but I’m sure—”

“Emetria, we can’t. It isn’t worth it.”

Luliver didn’t know until that moment that he had been hoping his father might do as Emetria suggested, didn’t know the true weight of disappointment until he heard Hades’ words.

It isn’t worth it.

I’m not worth it.

It would be strange for the Underworld to be his home, but it would have been nice, for once, to have been wanted.

He went back to the mortal world dozens of times after that. He played football with the boys in Hyde Park. They called him ‘Oliver’ after mishearing his name, and he didn’t correct them. It was nice to run around, but he couldn’t come frequently enough to become their friends, and they didn’t talk much. Not like with Persephone.

Even though he knew where she lived, he couldn’t call on her, couldn’t sneak up onto her roof garden unexpectedly without scaring her. He had to wait and hope she came out, and she rarely did.

Apart from May Day.

The next year, he walked her home again, and decided he wasn’t ready to go back to Olympus. He didn’t care if he was missed, if he risked Mother’s ire. He wanted to stay and watch the sun set over the city.

He went back to the park and hung around for a bit, too old now for the park and too young for much else. He climbed trees, made leaves float and dance in the palm of his hands, and watched the ducks on the pond.

As darkness began to tread upon the skyline, he made his way towards the park exit.

Something rustled in the bushes nearby. He paused, waiting for someone else to notice it, but the couple sitting on a bench nearby continued to ignore it, even when the rustling turned to a crunching, slurping sound.

Luliver paused, wondering if he should just continue on his way. He was hoping to see Persephone again before he left, hoping that maybe she'd be watching the sunset from her balcony and he could pretend they were watching it together. Maybe.

But he *had* to look. He had to make sure it wasn't… wasn't what he hoped it wasn't.

It was.

Two goblins and a redcap sat behind the bushes, sucking the flesh from a pile of dead pigeons, crunching down on the bones. It was unusual to find goblins and redcaps in the city. They kept to their courts or within the countryside. Unusual to find redcaps away from their king, or battle. They were vicious, bloodthirsty things. For one to be out here, munching on pigeon… it was either mad, or exiled.

Neither creature usually bothered with humans. Too much mess, too much drama. Valerian was strict in his penalties for harming them. But if they'd left his court…

He should probably leave.

But he thought of the couple on the bench, of what might happen to them if he didn't at least try to disperse them, and drew the dagger by his side.

"Folk," he said, stepping into the clearing, "you should leave this place, in the name of the faerie queen."

Three pairs of eyes turned to face him. In all his life, Luliver was sure he'd never seen three pairs of eyes so empty, so utterly lacking in whatever the faerie version of humanity was.

We don't have a word, Luliver knew. *We don't have an equivalent word for humanity because we're not supposed to feel what they feel.*

But he did. He felt everything.

It was why he didn't belong on Olympus. It was why his mother hated him. It was why speaking her name meant nothing.

It was why the goblins lunged, as if they knew there would be no repercussions for killing *this* son of the faerie queen's.

It's not worth it.

I'm not worth it.

Luliver slashed with his dagger, leaping out of reach, but there were more of them. Too many. He was outnumbered and probably outmatched. He sliced one goblin across the middle, but not deeply. Not enough to even delay it.

He had to run.

Goblins were invisible to the human eye, but even if it was safer to try and keep them contained to the park, he drove them into the city streets, no longer caring about keeping others out of harm's way. He prayed they'd get distracted, or run into the path of a car. Maybe he could lose them in a crowd.

He cut into an alley, hoping they'd speed past him, but the redcap had the scent of his quarry and would not let it go.

And for all that goblins were not the smartest of creatures, redcaps were; it commanded the goblins to cut off his other exit.

One slammed into him, the other grabbing his arm and clamping down on his wrist. Luliver screamed, circling his dagger round to strike it in the neck, kicking out wildly, catching the redcap leaning over him in the stomach.

The goblin he'd stabbed was a bleeding, pulsating mess in the corner. It was not getting back up again, but the other two were squaring up to him. He glanced around, searching his surroundings. When the goblin launched at him, he cut it across the chest as deeply as he could, and leapt up onto a nearby fire escape.

The rooftops of London were not made for human trespass, but a faerie boy, as light as air, could navigate them well enough. Especially when he was running for his life.

Redcaps were short and stout, but they could scale a building like a spider, and this one was no exception. Luliver could feel it behind him every second he was sliding over the rooftops, could swear he could feel its rancid breath on the back of his neck, each swipe that he missed by inches.

The redcap clawed at his leg and he let out a howl of pain, tumbling onto one of the roofs and sliding all the way to a flat one, spitting gravel. Blood streamed through his clothes. This was worse than the bite, which hadn't quite managed to break the skin. Much worse. His foe came sliding down the tiles, eyes red with hunger. Luliver grappled for his dagger, but he couldn't find it. He clicked his fingers together, trying to summon fire, a by-product of being a son of Hades.

The flames shot to life just as the redcap reached him. They weren't strong or wild, but they singed its nose, giving Luliver enough time to kick its chest and send it tumbling over the ledge of the building. It landed with a sickening thud.

It was almost certainly dead, but he wasn't waiting around to be sure, just in case it somehow managed to crawl back up before he did. Redcaps were hardy beasts.

He hauled himself upright. His leg was bleeding rather badly, his arm only bruised. He couldn't do much about that himself. Honestly, his best bet was to hobble back to the park and locate the circle back to Olympus. A servant might help him, if he was still bleeding by then.

He leapt onto the next roof and slithered to a stop, his leg radiating pain. He recognised where he was; Persephone's home was not far away.

She was almost certainly asleep by now, but maybe that was for the best. Perhaps he could just rest in her garden for a little while. It was more comfortable than anywhere else, and being near her always made him feel better. Perhaps she had a little of her mother's magic after all. Emetria was a healer. Maybe Persephone had a similar power, a warm light that touched your bones.

Just for a little while, he told himself. *Just until you've caught your breath.*

It was a slow, agonising journey to her roof garden, and he was both heartened and sad to see her lights already out. But it was for the best, after all. He didn't know how he'd explain his presence to her.

He leant against her windowsill, shuddering with pain, feeling his body go white with it. His calf felt sticky, but he didn't want to look. It would be clotting soon. It would be fine. His own mother had given him worse. At least these claws didn't *burn.*

He held back a sob. *Don't cry. Don't you dare cry.*

He thought of Persephone in the room behind him, sleeping soundlessly, untroubled by anything.

Don't wake her, don't wake her, don't—

The window slid upwards.

"Boy," said Persephone, "why are you crying?"

Luliver tumbled backwards into her room, and Sephy's wild, bright eyes hovered over him, curls unbound and stretching down towards him.

He had never seen her look at him like that before. He'd never seen *anyone* look at him like that before.

“You’re hurt,” she said. “I’m going to go get Dad—”

“Wait,” said Luliver, reaching out to grab her wrist. Panic flooded him. He couldn’t let her call her father. He’d probably call the mortal guard, and the place would be swarming with people, and he didn’t know what they might do but he knew it would be harder to get away. He would have to glamour her again, because what sensible person *wouldn’t* tell their parent that a weird boy had just fallen into their room?

He didn’t want to glamour her. He didn’t want her to *go,* in the way that fully glamoured people did. He wanted her as Sephy, not some trance-version of herself, but he needed her not to call for her father. Could he just take away that part of her freedom, and nothing else?

He caught her gaze. “Don’t tell your father,” he said, flinging out his power, and watching as it reached her eyes. Her pupils widened in response. “You don’t need to be afraid of me.”

“I’m not afraid of you,” she said, sounding far more natural than a person under a glamour should, like she wasn’t merely repeating his instruction. She still wore a slightly glazed look, but it was limited to her eyes, the rest of her face as mobile as ever. “Are you OK?”

“My leg hurts,” he said, because he had to say something and saying he was fine would be a lie, even if he wanted to be tough in front of her.

“I won’t tell Dad. Stay here.”

He knew he shouldn’t. He knew he should glamour her to forget and scramble out, but moving was difficult and moving away from her even worse.

She returned carrying a big green box, clicking on the lights and sitting down beside him. She clicked open the container and brought out a big pair of scissors, snipping away the shredded part of his trousers like she did this every other day.

“Dad sent me on a first aid course last summer,” she said, when she caught him staring. “You’re my first proper patient though. Sorry if I’m a bit rough!”

She was as gentle as a sparrow as she cleaned and bandaged his wound, the wrapping as clumsy as one would expect from someone not used to it. Luliver was silent all through it, his eyes fixed on her face.

She smiled at him when she was done. It was the smile she had given him as the girl in the park, and something else, too. It made his knees wobble, stationary though he was. “Is that better?”

“Yes. Thank you.”

She looked at him for a very long moment. “Who are you?” she asked. “What are you doing here?”

He should have put a stronger glamour on her, but he wasn’t sure he cared right now. “I’m a prince of Faerie,” he said, telling her the full truth for the first time. “I got into a fight with a goblin, and was looking for a place to rest.”

Persephone laughed. “Of course! Reminds me a little of the book I was reading for bed.” She grabbed it from her night stand. It was a beaten copy of something called *Peter Pan.* “Have you read it?” she asked.

He shook his head.

“But you’ve heard of it, right?”

He shook his head again.

Persephone looked aghast. “Oh no, this won’t do.” She got up again and went to the bed, returning with her arms full of pillows and blankets. She wrapped a coverlet around his shoulders and handed him a cushion, although he wasn’t sure what he was supposed to do with it.

He stopped wondering when Persephone sat down beside him, cross-legged, and started to read. He forgot about *everything.* The pain in his leg, the world outside, the fear that had been pulsing through him not long ago. The world melted away behind her words, and soon he was sailing off to Neverland.

“*She also said she would give him a kiss if he liked, but Peter did not know what she meant, and he held out his hand expectantly. ‘Surely you know what a kiss is?’ she asked, aghast.*

“‘I shall know when you give it to me,’ he replied stiffly, and not to hurt his feeling she gave him a thimble.”

Luliver looked up. “What’s a thimble?”

Persephone stared at him incredulously. “You don’t know what a thimble is?”

Luliver cocked his head, and smiled, copying the way people at court smiled at each other when they wanted something. “I shall know what it is when you give it to me.”

Persephone laughed, a soft, infectious sort of sound, and she shuffled towards a box at the side of the room. It was stuffed with needles, thread and scraps of fabric. She returned and dropped something into his palm. It was small and silver, the size of an acorn, built like a tiny cup.

He admired it for a moment. “What does it do?”

Sephy giggled, and the sound made something bloom inside his chest, even more so when she eased the thimble from his hand. He tried not to think too much about the warmth of her touch on him. It didn't used to feel that way.

She slid the thimble onto the tip of her index finger. "It's to guard your finger from needles as you're threading," she explained, miming sewing.

Luliver had never seen the faeries at court use such a thing, but he supposed they didn't need to. Faeries were not nearly so delicate or breakable. Although, Persephone didn't *look* like either of those things. He was flummoxed by the strange urge he had to protect her whilst also being startlingly sure that she was the one protecting *him.* Maybe not from goblins, but something else, something he couldn't name and wished he could.

"Why does Wendy give one to Peter?" he asked.

"Because he doesn't know what a kiss is."

He was tempted to suggest he didn't know what a kiss was either, to see if she would show him, but he lost his nerve at the last moment.

She looked at him steadily, and then handed the thimble back to him. "Keep it, if you like," she said.

Luliver had no idea what he was supposed to do with it, but the minute Sephy's fingers closed around his, he knew he wasn't ever giving it up. She smiled at him, and it reached the pit of his stomach. How was it that he could find more sunshine in that girl's smile than in the endless skies in the Court of Olympus?

"More story?" she suggested.

His mouth felt dry. "Yes, please."

He woke at dawn, bluish light swamping the room, a rising ray of light landing on the freckled, primrose cheek of the girl lying beside him, an open book still clasped to her chest. He reached across and tugged on one of her curls, just enough to rouse her.

"Persephone," he whispered, waiting for her eyes to snap open in fear.

She murmured something, but she did not sound afraid, not even when she looked at him. Her glamour should have worn off in the night, hesitant as he'd been to place it on her in the first place.

"I need to go," he said.

"Don't forget the kiss…" she whispered.

Luliver paused, certain he'd misheard her, but a second later he saw her finger pointing towards the thimble on the floor. He picked it up, the metal still warm, and slid it into his pocket.

He sighed. “You need to forget last night,” he whispered, each word paining him. “Forget I ever came here.”

“I need to forget you were here?” Her voice sounded like a question, like she had a choice.

“Forget,” he said, “forget everything.”

“I’ll forget everything.”

“Go back to sleep.”

Her eyes flickered closed, but she grabbed his hand before she went, and held it across the book.

They hadn’t reached the end.

Luliver took the book and folded it into his jacket, promising he’d bring it back next time.

She didn’t come.

The next May Day, she wasn’t there. He fell into something like a panic, thinking something must have happened to her, because memory or no he couldn’t imagine her just *forgetting.* She felt something, remembered something. She always came. Always.

He raced to her flat. None of the lights were on, and when he climbed up to her window, the room was pristine and untouched. The birdfeeder was bare.

They hadn’t been home in a while.

He pretended to be a friend from school and asked one of the neighbours if they’d seen them.

“On holiday, I think,” said the woman who answered the door. “Back next week. Shall I tell her you stopped by?”

Luliver glamoured her into forgetting he’d ever asked, because he felt like he’d die of embarrassment if Persephone found out he’d been asking about her, even if she had no idea who he was.

He didn’t know what to do with the rest of his day, didn’t know what to do with the rest of his *year.* He’d have to find some other way of talking to her, just for a bit. Just to tide him over until the next year.

He dropped into a nearby bench and put his head in his hands.

Luliver, this is ridiculous.

He couldn't keep living his life like this, couldn't keep relying on her for a little moment of sunshine each year. Today was just another reminder of how separate her life was from his, how she was to grow older and further away from him each passing year.

She wasn't always going to come to the park. He needed to find a way to be all right with that.

He wandered into the city, slow as he liked, distracting himself with the lives of others, their petty squabbles, their small joys, their quests for items for their loved ones. He wound up at a second-hand book shop he'd been to a few times before. He liked bookshops. He liked the smell of paper and ink, the feel of the covers, the weight of stories old and new. A good book always made him feel like he wasn't completely alone, even if the *really* good ones he wanted to share with Sephy.

He hadn't forgotten what it was like to be read to, hadn't forgotten anything about that night at all. He sometimes thumbed the thimble as he read himself, remembering the sound of her voice, and wondering how long he'd have to go without hearing it before he'd forget it entirely.

Mortal parents read to their children a lot, he gathered, but he'd never experienced it first hand before.

If I ever have children, I'd read to them, he vowed, but then he shook the thought away. It was hard to imagine him *with* someone. It was hard to imagine not being alone.

A book caught his eye in the children's section. It was an old, hardback copy of *Peter Pan,* with faded gold writing and pretty illustrations. It was a lot nicer than the tattered copy he brought to return to Persephone.

It was her birthday soon. He remembered her saying, years ago, that it fell just after May Day. Mortals tended to celebrate the occasion with a great deal of presents. If he slipped one in that day, there'd be no reason to find it suspicious…

He enchanted a handful of leaves to look like mortal money and paid the shopkeeper promptly, buying a sheet of brown paper to wrap up the book, and glamouring the wrapping with the impression of leaves.

He wanted to write something inside the volume, some words of his that she could have even if she didn't know who he was. He pondered on the message for some time, searching for something with meaning, that would show he cared, that could convey longing without being too strange or too unnatural or creepy.

From your secret admirer—

No, definitely not.

From the faerie prince, who finds his Neverland with you.

Way too over-the-top.

Eventually, he settled on, *Persephone, sometimes I wish you were the one that wouldn't grow up.*

For he was Peter Pan and she was Wendy, doomed to grow old and die while he stayed young forever, and he would do anything to have her stay young and happy and know he never had to watch her wither. She was a child of spring, but soon summer would come, and autumn would all too quickly pull her away from him.

And one day, winter.

Satisfied with the inscription and the wrapping, he took the gift back to Olympus, and waited in trembling anticipation for her birthday to arrive.

It couldn't come fast enough.

He decided to wait until the evening, certain she'd be doing something during the day and not wanting to risk missing her again. Sure enough, she didn't return until it was almost night, and he waited a handful of agonising minutes before posting it through the letterbox and racing up to the roofs to wait, hoping to catch a glimpse of her opening it.

It was a while until he detected any movement, until he spied Persephone racing into her room in noisy tears, throwing herself down on the bed.

Instinctively, he moved closer, forgetting she didn't know him, forgetting how utterly terrifying it would be to find a stranger on your roof. He didn't care. He wanted to help her, and to hurt whoever had made her feel this way.

But before he could reach her—before he could even work out what he was planning on doing—the door clicked open, and in walked a slim, brown-haired woman with sad eyes and a kind face. She sat down on the bed beside Persephone and stroked her back, murmuring soft words.

He didn't catch them, but he caught the moment when Persephone turned, and the woman handed her the gift Luliver had posted earlier.

Persephone admired the wrapping for a long moment before peeling it open, tracing her fingers over the painted leaves, as if she half-expected them to vanish. She peeled the book from the paper, read the inscription, and her face broke into a wide smile, tears gone in an instant.

He didn't know what it was like to make someone else feel joy. His mother had sometimes smiled when he had done something truly horrible,

but the delight at seeing her happy was tempered by his self-disgust, his guilt at having done something awful, even if it was for someone else. But he hadn't done anything bad today. He'd just given someone a present, he'd given *Persephone* a present, and she loved it.

He would have done anything to see her smile, but he was glad that it was a good thing.

After the woman left, Persephone slid out of the window, and he folded into the shadow of one of the other buildings. She hugged the volume to her chest.

"Thank you," she said to the sky.

At the time, he thought those might have been the most beautiful words he'd ever heard.

A year later, he could not sneak away from the feasts of Beltane to go and visit Persephone in the sunlight. He was older now, too large to fit under tables, and the women at court had started to notice him in ways he did not like to be noticed. He was expected at Beltane now that he was no longer a virgin, and he would be expected to *partake.*

"Where is that delightful young boy of yours?" The women of Court would croon to his mother, or ask his brother if he could be "brought out to play" in an entirely different way to what used to pass as a game.

He had learnt some ways of avoiding them. Blending into the shadows was an art form, but it didn't always work. Flirting with them and plying them with drinks until they were too drunk to be bothersome was another.

Lately, a rumour had started to spread that he had a particular sick taste for mortals. He'd inflamed the rumours, glamouring the mortal pets to scream when they were with him.

That worked best of all.

Despite Beltane being a festival of fertility, almost everyone was ignoring him, engaged in other frivolities.

He wondered if he could slip away unnoticed yet, and thumbed the thimble in his pocket, wondering what Persephone was doing right now and how much better everything would be if he could just have her to talk to.

An imp appeared at his side, a servant carrying a plate of bread stuffed with currants and glazed with honey. She placed a folded slip in his hand and fluttered away without a word.

Luliver stared after her, but she'd already disappeared into the writhing throngs of bodies.

He unfolded the note, his blood chilling.

Your father has been injured. Come to the Underworld immediately.
Auntie Em

The note was otherwise anonymous, and he had never called Emetria Auntie Em in front of anyone else. No one would assume the note was from her.

But why trouble to hide her identity if Lord Hades was hurt? Surely it would be natural for him to go in this instance? Maybe Emetria needed his blood to heal. Why would she need to be secretive about that?

He wouldn't get answers hanging around. He headed to the teleportation circles immediately, keeping away from as many guards as possible.

Emetria was waiting for him on the other side of the Underworld, pacing, her face fraught and white.

"You're here," she said. "Good. I just arrived myself."

"What's going on?"

"I know little more than you do. Come quickly."

Slight panic grew inside him. "Is it… bad?"

"I don't know."

"Then why did you—"

"Let's not waste time."

She hurried out of the chamber, down to the banks of the River Styx. Luliver's stomach coiled. He would probably never grow used to the sight of the souls drifting beneath the surface, the pain of their expressions.

"Do you think they feel anything?" He'd asked his father once.

"I'd like to hope not," had been his reply. "But I imagine they do. A muted version of whatever we feel."

It wasn't very comforting.

Emetria dipped her staff into the water, and Charon arrived with his boat, all scars and skeleton. Luliver tried not to cringe, to think of nicer things as the howling filled his ears.

Emetria had sung the first time she'd brought him down here. She did not sing today.

He thought of Persephone instead, but for once, he didn't want her beside him. Not in this cold, dark place where the waters shivered and shrieked.

The boat docked. Emetria seized her basket and shot out, not even checking to see if Luliver was following. She banged on the door. A fire imp opened it, a small, freckled creature with a shock of orange hair.

"You're here," she said, her voice stark.

Emetria breezed past her. "Is it mortal?"

“We aren’t sure. We’ve done what we can, but there’s… there’s a lot of damage. And he isn’t healing. It’s beyond our magic.”

Emetria didn’t ask what had happened. That was strange, he thought. *He* wanted to know.

She barged into his father’s chambers. Courtiers and healers stood around the bed, shielding their lord from view. The room was full of hushed, dark murmurs, and there was a blackness to the room, deeper and colder than before.

“Out,” Emetria commanded.

A few looked like they were about to say something, but the look in Emetria’s eyes made them think otherwise. Luliver had never seen Emetria like this before, any softness in her filed to a sharp point.

The crowd left, and he turned to the figure lying on the bed.

Everything inside him stiffened. His father was as pale as milk and utterly still, his great wings spread across the bed and riddled with bolts. Blood congealed against the crow-black feathers, and across the rest of his body. He was swathed in bandages, and the wet sheen to his skin and the slightest murmur of his breath was the only indication he was still living at all.

Emetria’s basket thudded against the floor. She drifted over to Hades’ side, her fingers skimming his flesh. Light shimmered from her tips, moving over every injury. The wounds did not heal. Nothing altered at all. Instruments came out of her basket, probing his inert body. She pricked his finger and tasted his blood.

“Why… why are his wings still out?” Luliver asked, partly just to add a voice to the room.

“He can’t dissolve them when they’re injured,” she explained. “Not when they’re this bad.”

“Why are the bolts still in?”

“You can do more damage removing them.”

“Can you… can you fix him?”

She paused, and it was like the silence before a wave crashed, all the quiet of a gathering storm. “Possibly,” she said, and then she dropped down onto her knees, her hands clenched together. It was almost like prayer. Faeries didn’t pray. Not to gods. Not as a general rule. But they might ask the fates for a reprieve, or the stars for forgiveness.

He wondered what she was asking for, and fear and panic intermingled inside.

“You need my blood, don’t you?” Luliver said. “You don’t have to ask. Give it to him.”

“It isn’t that simple—”

“Give it to him!”

“Luliver,” Emetria whispered, “don’t.” She sighed, and it was the sigh of a thousand years, a sigh that fell against his heart like a piece of lead. Luliver found he was fixed to the spot, as still and powerless as a statue.

Emetria collected a vial from her basket, tilted it into Hades’ lips, and whispered something in his ear. Hades started to stir, and she placed a bright, glowing palm against his chest. “Easy, my friend.”

“Emetria,” he rasped. “If they called you, it must be serious.”

Emetria said nothing.

“Your silence makes me uneasy.”

“There are three different poisons inside your blood,” she said, her voice taut. “And you have bled a great deal. I am lending you some of my energy. It will not last long.”

“Limited options, then.”

“I brought the boy,” she said.

Hades’ gaze turned towards him, his bright eyes glazed and dull. “I see.”

“I came to offer you my blood—”

“That is not what we require of you.” He looked back to Emetria, and the two seemed to be conversing without words. “You’re sure?”

Emetria bowed her head.

“Come, boy,” Hades beckoned him.

Luliver walked forward, having no idea of where he was supposed to go, what he was supposed to do. He wondered if he was trembling, or if he was as stiff as he felt.

Hades gestured to a dagger on the side of his bed. “Pick it up,” he commanded.

Luliver did. “What am I to do with it?”

Hades raised a hand and pointed to a space between his third and forth ribs. He did not say anything.

Luliver’s heart plummeted, as if suddenly finding himself at the edge of a cliff, nothing but dizzying depths beneath. “No,” he murmured, his voice slipping out of him, unbidden.

Hades shook his head. “You want to risk Zeron becoming Lord of Hell?”

“What difference does that make to me—”

“He isn’t right for it.”

“You marked him!”

“A century ago, when he was a different man.”

“I won’t do it,” he said. “Pick someone else.”

“There is no one else,” said Emetria. “It should be you.”

“I don’t want it.”

“Neither did I,” said Hades solemnly. “Which makes you all the better fit.”

Luliver glanced desperately at Emetria, hoping for an escape, a reprieve, a solution. Anything to avoid— “Fix him.”

“I’m not sure I can—”

“Try it!”

“Luliver,” said Hades, with unusual softness. Luliver startled. He wasn’t sure he’d ever heard his father say his name before, but now his hands were on his, brushing over the hilt of the dagger. “You need to do this.”

Luliver looked once more to Emetria. “Please,” he said, “don’t make me—”

“I don’t want to *make* you do anything.”

But she could, and those words confirmed it. If he didn’t agree, she would command him to. He would have no choice.

He *did* have no choice. It was just being framed like one.

“I hate you for this,” he said, his voice quavering. “I could hate you both.”

“I know,” said Emetria, her eyes lined with silver, like she was the one about to die. “I’m sorry.”

“I’m sorry too,” said Hades, and guided the dagger to the right spot. In his free hand, he caught Luliver’s face. “I have regrets,” he said. “I wish we’d had more time.”

Luliver wasn’t sure what he meant by that, but his father’s eyes closed before he could. “Quickly!” hissed Emetria. “Before—”

He plunged the dagger into his father’s ribcage.

Muscle twitched under the blade, the body jerking back. Eyes rolled beneath closed lids, and the great wings shuddered and melted away, bolts clanging to the floor.

And then there was an awful, endless stillness, and something cracked inside Luliver’s chest. The death of a dream he didn’t even know he’d had.

He had killed his father.

His father was dead.

And anything that was or might have been was gone forever.

Emetria bowed her head, and kissed the hand that had fallen from Luliver's. "Farewell, Angelo," she said, and Luliver stiffened. He had never heard anyone ever use his father's former name. He had forever been Hades to him. It seemed impossible that he should have another name, impossible that he never knew it, and Emetria did. She uttered it again, her voice turning rusty. Tears trembled down her cheeks.

Luliver trembled too, with a rage that simmered from his very core. How dare she cry, after making him do this, without even trying to save him?

A warmth spread from his arm, tingling at first, and then growing to the point of burning, like lava pouring into his veins. He stumbled back. Emetria moved for him, but he pushed her away, crashing into the corridor, knocking into the courtiers gathered around the door.

He was going to vomit or explode, he wasn't sure which. His entire body was being overridden, replaced with something else.

He crashed through the doors and into the Underworld, just as two monstrous wings erupted from his back.

He belched out fire, a ring of it surrounding him. He scorched the rock black, waves of it running from his fingers. It felt endless.

When he finally emerged, he realised the Court of Night had gathered around him. They stared at his blackened, unburnt body, their faces a fearful intermingling of awe and horror.

One by one, they bowed to him.

He still had his father's blood on his hands.

No one except Emetria knew why he had done it. He heard all manner of rumours circulating. A few, optimistic members of the court supposed it might have been a mercy killing. Others, while not quick to condemn him, assumed he'd seized his chance for power. Darker rumours circulated that he'd organised the attack in the first place.

After he killed the first soul thieves and the faerie who'd tried to assassinate him, the rumours stopped altogether. No one dared whisper about

him now. They had seen him laugh and cackle as he'd tortured her and torn the heart from her chest. There was nothing benign about the new Hades. It hardly mattered why he had done it; he loved the power he now held, craved more of it. He needed no court; his own power was great enough to defend the gates of Hell.

And if he wanted company? He brought in mortals.

There was no display of weakness, now. Power was his mask. And he wore it to perfection.

None of the women touched him again. No one ever came near him. Even Emetria skirted around him, a victim to the rumours or the own harsh words he spat at her during his father's funeral.

"I did what you asked. You should be happy."

"Nothing about this makes me happy."

Or perhaps it was what he said to her after he killed the assassin.

"You wanted this, my dear Aunt Em."

"I never wanted this for you."

One night, after he'd finished decorating the halls with the remains of his enemies, he slouched back to the palace and lay against the throne. It still felt wrong to sit in it, the surface sharp and cold and glassy. No glamour he'd cast could dispel it.

"I am a monster," he whispered to the dark.

And he knew, if he could say it, then it must be true.

The spring of the year Persephone turned sixteen, he went back to the park. As Lord of Night, he was now condemned to the dark save two days every year. He had gone to see her once before, to stare beneath her garden and soak up a few hours of sunlight. He hadn't had long with her, she had only been out for a few minutes to feed the birds. A snippet of her was all he had. He dared not wish for more.

But one look at her face, and the world was all right again, just for a moment.

He returned to the park on May Day, and so did she, despite the rain misting through the gardens. He found her in the bandstand, squeezing out her long wheat-brown hair and braiding it down her back. Beads of water clung to her skin like gemstones, and he wished she knew him well enough for him to dust off those droplets and touch the freckles of her cheeks. He wanted to kiss them from her skin.

He summoned his courage, and stepped into the bandstand. "We chose the wrong day for a walk," he said.

Persephone turned to face him, and her eyes went wide. He buckled slightly under the gaze, wondering if it was fear. She had not worn that look before, but it had been years since they had spoken. Maybe she was just old enough now to be wary of strangers. Perhaps this was a terrible mistake—

"Or the right one," she said, and her smile obliterated all thoughts of fleeing. All thoughts entirely, for a moment. "I actually quite like the rain."

It was the first time in two years someone had looked at him without fear or fury or disdain, and for a moment, he was struck dumb, a plant that had forgotten the sensation of water, deprived of something it should need to live.

He turned to gaze out at the park, unsure if he could endure the intensity of such a look. "I rather enjoy the rain, too."

Persephone inched closer, too close and still far too far away. His heart hammered. "There's something very peaceful about it," she continued. "Especially when it's warm, and the sun starts to come out. There's

something lovely about the smell, isn't there? It has a name, but I forget what it is."

"Petrichor," he said.

"Petrichor! That's it. It's lovely. And the rain looks like pearls against the grass, doesn't it? I almost want to thread them on a necklace. But then they're almost prettier because you can't do that, because they won't last—"

I'd thread raindrops for you, he realised. *I'd press this moment into a necklace for you, if I could.*

"Sorry," she said, looking up, "I'm rambling, aren't I?"

"Not at all."

"Do you… come here often?" She blushed. "Ah, oh, that sounds like a pick-up line. It's not, I promise. I just… I come here all the time and—"

"I'm just visiting," he says, "but I'm usually in town this time of year."

"Where do you come from?"

He paused. "Greece," he said, as the pocket realm Olympus existed inside of was located in that part of the world. He was only grateful he could get away with saying that and didn't have to say *the Underworld* and act like he was being sarcastic.

Persephone frowned. "You're Greek? But your accent is… Did you go to a fancy international school, or something?"

"I had a very thorough education."

Thorough, fancy, private. Zera had seen to it that he knew everything she thought he ought to know, and had never been short of teachers. But he knew he was treading dangerous waters now, that every question she asked would leave him trying to skirt around it. No wonder Emetria had decided that they couldn't keep doing this.

Leave, said a voice inside him, *leave before she knows you're a monster. Leave before she's scared.*

I cannot, said another voice. *I have to have this moment with her. Please. Just a few minutes more.*

"What about you?" he asked, hoping to pepper her with questions that would distract from asking any of her own. "You said you come here often —have you lived here all your life?"

She nodded, but he knew in part that was a lie too, that she was brought to London as a baby.

But that wasn't the sort of thing you told strangers in the park.

"Do you like it here?" he asked.

"London? Or the park?"

“Both.”

“I like my home and my family, but I think I’m not much of a city dweller.”

“No?”

“I like the outdoors. I like light and flowers, birdsong and rain. I think a little country cottage would be my ideal residence.”

He smiled, imagining her in that setting. It was a peaceful image.

“What about you?” she asked. “Where would you live, if you could live anywhere at all?”

With you, in that cottage, came the unbidden truth, and he tensed, knowing he needed to say something, but that that was far too much. “The country sounds nice to me, too,” he said.

Not a lie, even though, after he said it, he realised it wasn’t the location he wanted, but her.

He was glad he didn’t realise that before.

“What was it like, growing up in Greece?” she continued, bringing him back to those dangerous waters.

“Lonely,” he said, because that was true, and anything else would give too much away.

He expected the shortness of his answer to deter her, maybe even make her uncomfortable. She’d probably want to leave, and he couldn’t think of what to do to make her stay.

“I get that,” Persephone said, and when he looked up, he was surprised to find her so close by. “I have a lovely family, but for the most part, it’s just me and Dad. We’re partners in most things but there’s still a divide. I always wanted siblings, but… well. It wasn’t on the cards. Sorry if I touched a nerve. Are you on your own, too?”

“Yes,” he said, glad she hadn’t directly asked about *his* siblings, and thus he didn’t have to explain about the newly-appointed Ares.

“Not much fun, is it?”

“No.”

She held out her hand. “I’m Persephone,” she said. “Funny name, I know—”

“It’s lovely.” He took her hand, warm and supple as he remembered. He resisted the urge to kiss it, a gesture long out of fashion with mortals but common amongst the fae. “Hades.”

She stared at him, and he realised his mistake. He’d grown so used to the new name, he’d forgotten how strange it must have sounded to mortals.

She burst out laughing. “Oh, that’s very funny, you had me there. Hades and Persephone, very smooth. Sure.”

He wished he could bottle her laughter and take it home with him.

She wiped a tear from her eye. “No one gives boys ancient Greek names anymore. Well, apart from Jason. Shame really, because I always felt Hades got kind of a raw deal, you know?”

She looked at him, as though waiting for him to disagree, but he found himself struck dumb by the proximity of her face, the warmth of the brown in her eyes, the glints of green. He wanted to caress the smattering of freckles across her nose, trace his fingers to other parts of her face, like those soft, rosebud lips...

He had not wanted to kiss her—really kiss her—before now, but the root of that desire must have existed long ago.

He wanted to kiss her. He *could* kiss her. They were close enough. She might even like it.

But he would have to glamour her afterwards. She would never remember. And what if it was her first kiss, and he took that from her, like someone else had taken his?

Cold dread coiled inside him. *And more.* They had taken more.

And more than he wanted to kiss her, he wanted her to kiss *him.* He wanted to be wanted by her.

Her, her. No one else.

Persephone.

“So… what is your actual name?”

Her question wrenched him back to the present, to the girl standing in front of him who had no idea who he really was.

“Luliver,” he said.

Every time, he waited for some flicker of recognition, and each time, it never came. Each introduction hurt more than the last. He told himself to stop praying for a miracle, but somehow, he never did.

He had to content himself with her smile.

“Oh, that’s unusual too!” she said. “I like it. It’s much softer on the tongue than Hades. Does it mean anything?”

He had no idea, but he was inclined to think not, just a collection of sounds his mother had fancied sounded appropriate. “I don’t think so,” he said. “What about Persephone?”

“Well, my father is a huge fan of Greek Mythology, and Persephone is one of the few girls who kinda maybe gets a happy ending. Presuming that

she's a willing participant in the whole abduction thing."

He'd heard the tale of the original Hades and Persephone a dozen times. Some thought it a sweet tale, this dark king falling for a goddess of sunlight and spring. The lack of details always troubled him, namely not knowing Persephone's willingness. It might have been the only bad thing Hades ever really did, but it was still a black stain on his character. Who could do that to another person?

But now, he thought he could understand why he'd done it, so desperate for company, so desperate for *her* that he lost all thought and reason. He just didn't want to be alone in the dark. He just wanted the opportunity to know her.

Luliver would never strip Persephone's choices from her, but he wasn't immune to thinking about it.

I could take you with me now. I could glamour you into saying lovely things forever. I could make you do whatever I wanted.

And I would be a true monster for it.

And it was not her shell he wanted. It was her, all of her. All her smiles and joy and loveliness. He wanted her to be happy. He wanted her to want *him.* But if he could only have one of those things, he'd pick her happiness, every time. He could live in shadows, he'd grown up in them, moulded them around his body like clay. But there was not a shadow inside of her, and he'd be damned forever if he let one reside there for his sake.

"It suits you," he said finally.

Was that his imagination, or was that the ghost of a blush in her cheeks as she tugged on the ends of her hair? "So, um, what do you do for fun? When you're not hiding in bandstands during rainstorms?"

"Hiding in bandstrands during rainstorms seems an exquisite use of my time." He smirked, and she returned it too. "I'm a fan of nature, when I can get to it. I also like daytime cookery shows and reading."

"Be serious."

"I never lie."

Persephone raised an eyebrow, still skeptical."What do you read?"

"I have a preference for classic children's literature. I enjoy the adventure and the whimsy—"

"You're pulling my leg."

He blinked at her. "Why would I do that?"

"Has Libby set this up?"

"Who's Libby?"

“Guys that look like you and are *that* smooth do not walk about in rainstorms dressed like *that* professing love for children’s literature—”

Hades’ smoothed down the tight grey shirt and wondered what was wrong with it. He’d seen other young mortal men wear similar things. He touched his hair, wondering if he’d forgotten to take off his crown. “What’s wrong with the ensemble?”

“It’s… you’re…” Persephone blushed a shade of deep magenta. “Libby really didn’t send you? You genuinely love children’s literature?”

It must be exhausting to be mortal, and never sure whether or not someone was lying to you. “I do,” he said.

Persephone breathed, long and slow. “OK, all right. I’ll bite.”

Please do, he said, and quickly squashed the thought down. “And what about you? What do you enjoy doing?”

“Reading children’s books.” She smiled. “Also, I’m in a theatre club at school. We’re doing *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* at the moment. We’re performing it for the summer solstice here in the park. I’m Titania.”

He enjoyed the vision of her dressed up as queen of the faeries. She’d look lovely with flowers in her hair, and in the loose floaty gowns mortals usually associated with his kind. A true creature of spring.

“I’m sure you’ll be wonderful.”

She pulled on her hair again. “I do have a very nice costume.”

“Whatever you wear will be lovely.”

Her cheeks reddened, and he wondered if he’d said too much, if it was an uncomfortable blush, if he was being too familiar with her.

Something buzzed in the pocket of her jeans, and she snatched out a phone. She read something on the screen.

“My friend Libby,” she said, looking back to him. “She wants to hang out.”

“You should go to her.”

Persephone opened her mouth, but it hung there for too long, whatever she wanted to say not quite reaching her lips.

Hades squared up to her, and slid a hand across her cheek. Her eyes widened, and he wondered why she wasn’t trying to move away. The urge to kiss her, to test his luck, surged painfully within him.

But he wasn’t sure he could bear to try, either because it was too much of a liberty, or because he was frightened of the agony of doing it once and never, ever being able to do so again.

The glamour spiralled out of him, and spilled into her eyes.

“Forget we spoke,” he whispered, the words falling numb on his tongue. It got harder every time. “Go and see your friend. Have a lovely day.”

He leaned down and kissed her cheek, and he let his lips linger there a little too long, hovering beside that house of breath.

Persephone, Persephone.

Before she could reject him, he leapt over the railing and vanished into the bushes, heart thumping, *all* of him thumping with a wild, nervous energy, something like fear and something else entirely. He chanced a look back, as lingering as he dared.

Persephone was still standing in the bandstand, staring into the distance, her fingers outstretched as if she was trying to clutch at something. The light rain still glossed the air around her, and even though he’d sworn to himself that he would never be powerless again, he would have given everything he had to go back to that space and never leave her side again.

He came back for the Summer Solstice, trawling through the park in search of the production she’d spoken of, desperate to see her again, to be able to gaze at her uninterrupted, without it being strange or odd. He arrived just as it was beginning.

It was a funny enough performance, even if some of the young actors didn’t quite seem to understand what they were saying and occasionally forgot their lines. Most of the costumes were ropey, the props cheap, although that barely seemed to matter whenever the actor playing Bottom spoke. He was particularly entertaining.

Persephone, of course, was wonderful. She breathed life into the lines as she dominated the stage in her gown of petals. Her face was painted with glitter, and flowers wove through her hair.

The original Persephone probably looked a lot like that, he thought. Minus the glitter.

After the production was done and the audience began to disperse, he waited for her to finish packing up. He summoned a bouquet of flowers, and then realised how creepy and ridiculous that looked, so he fashioned something simpler out of daisies and wildflowers plucked from the hedges. He’d tell her he was charmed by her performance. Maybe he’d invite her out

for a drink. What was the mortal drinking age again? Maybe a coffee instead. They could go on a real date. Maybe he wouldn't even glamour her, this time. Maybe they could meet again in a year and they could actually have some kind of relationship that wasn't reset every time they met.

For a few years, at least. She was bound to notice he barely aged eventually.

Bound to get suspicious they kept meeting out of the blue, too, and that he disappeared every year with no way of getting in contact.

He shook his thoughts away. That was a problem for another day. Today, he was here, and he was going to speak to her—

Before he could reach her side, another boy appeared behind her, grabbing her from the back and spinning her round. She laughed, wriggling out of his arms only to fold into them a second later, and kissed him full on the mouth.

Hades' heart dropped into the pit of his stomach. He had never thought to think that she might have a boyfriend, and of course she did, for she was bright and lovely. Half the boys she met probably fell a little bit in love with her.

He should not have been surprised.

She is not yours. She is not some doll that comes to life whenever you want to play with her. She is a person, wild and free. She will always be out of your reach.

He was hit at once by the impossible reality of the situation; that she was mortal, and would grow until she died, and he had no choice but to stay in the shadows and watch, any love he could ever feel for anyone eclipsed in the youth of his immortal life, imprisoned in the shell of this beautiful human girl who would perish never remembering his name.

No choice, but to watch until that day, like one couldn't tear their eyes from a battle, no matter the impossible odds.

He should not have been able to go to the next Samhain celebrations. He had already used up both of his days. Irma—the imp that had served his father, and the one fae servant he still employed from time to time—brought up the subject of attending when Zera sent out the invites. He politely declined and cited his reasons, hoping she wouldn't demand he attend anyway.

His rejection was refused.

I will offer you one extra day, Lord of Night, but should you dare use up your days in the future, I will deny them to you altogether, or have you accompany us regardless.

It was the only power she still had now that he'd escaped her clutches, and they both knew it. It was just as well she didn't know why those two days were so important to him. He *hated* to think what would happen if his mother ever found out about Persephone.

The Samhain celebrations were as beautiful and tedious as ever, although he was surprised to discover that they were being held in London. Historically they'd been held all over the place, in major cities, in abandoned mansions… his mother made everything a party.

Satisfied that everyone was thoroughly drunk and his presence had been noted, he slipped silently away from the revelry, making his way back slowly across the glittering rooftops of London. It had rained earlier in the day, and every surface brimmed with the orange light of the lamps.

He had to swing by Persephone's window, seeing as he'd been granted this extra day. She was almost certainly asleep, but it was nice to sit on the opposite building and know that she was close by. Sure enough, her window was dark, and he was not going to get any closer.

"Good night, Persephone," he whispered, blowing a kiss in her direction.

He was about to spring off the roof and continue on foot when something caught his eye. A squat, green-skinned creature with a mound of wiry black hair rooting through the dustbins in an alley. A goblin.

It stopped in its rummaging and sniffed the air, scenting something else. A stillness crept upon the alley, and another goblin and a couple of deranged, vicious-looking pixies slunk from the shadows.

Hades' heart stilled.

"You sure you don't need me to walk you to your door?" said a voice nearby. It was female, warm and confident.

"I'm fine. Literally just a couple of streets away."

Persephone.

He leapt onto the next roof and dropped down onto a fire escape. It was her. He'd recognise her voice anywhere, his ears seeking it out like eyes turn towards a light.

The Unseelie had noticed her too.

He didn't know why they had singled her out, if the thin droplets of fae blood in her gave off a particularly arousing scent, but they were following her in earnest.

To her credit, she stopped a couple of times, looking backwards into the dark, but she didn't see them. Humans never did.

He waited until she had turned a corner onto the main street and then dropped onto the first goblin, cracking its neck with a swift jerk and kicking its body to the shadows.

Once upon a time, such violence would have horrified him. Not any more. The only thing that horrified him was how close it had been to Persephone.

And the sick, awful feeling of what she would think of him if she saw him this way.

The remaining three stared at him, shrinking and hissing, staring at the body on the floor.

Hades summoned a fireball into his fist, letting the flames curl through his fingers. He looked at them lazily, shucking out his wings, cutting off light entirely.

The Unseelie shrank further into the shadows. Gone were the times he ran from them.

"Quite the soiree we're having tonight," he said, keeping his voice dark and steady. "But unless you'd like me to cut your number further, I suggest you leave this place."

"But—" the goblin started.

Hades unleashed his fireball and half-melted the nose from the goblin's face. It howled, hitting the ground.

“Do I need to repeat myself?” Hades asked.

The pixies exchanged terrified glances, before grabbing the goblin by the back of its coat and disappearing into the dark. Hades waited to make sure they were gone, before flying up to the rooftops and perching there like a gargoyle. A light had come on in Persephone’s window. She lay on the bed, clutching a cat to her chest. She looked happy.

And safe. For a little while longer.

He staggered back through the park, trying not to think about what would have happened if he hadn’t been there. What *could* happen. He was only around one or two days a year. He could not protect her.

He managed to purchase an amulet of protection, although he had to wait several months before he was able to deliver it, too afraid to entrust the task to someone else lest they uncover his secret and report it back to his mother. He tried, once, to fight through the restriction, but the pain had become too great and he was forced to turn back.

He did not go to the park that year. He couldn’t bear the thought of speaking to her again, the monster in the dark, the slayer of goblins. He was a creature of the night and did not belong in her world of the sun.

Instead, he left the necklace on her table while she was out, whispered a silent plea for her safety, and disappeared from her life once more.

He had to stop doing this.

He had to stop seeing her.

The incident with the Unseelie was just another reminder of her mortality and his obsession, and he could not live with that kind of terror for the rest of his life. He couldn’t see her anymore.

But he couldn’t stop thinking about her, either.

She was in his dreams and in his heart, whispering sweet words and kissing his lips. Every time he was lost or hurt or angry or afraid, she was there, and he wondered when he’d wandered into the snare of her soul and why he couldn’t shake himself free.

He couldn’t feel this way forever. It would fade. One day.

And then, the Samhain after she turned seventeen, he looked across the ballroom and saw her there. Every terror, every dread, every fear he’d ever had crashed inwardly. He was buried beneath an avalanche of horror.

No, no, no, not her. Not here.

Any mortal there was a potential sacrifice, and somehow he knew, *he knew* that it would be her, and he knew he would do anything, anything, to get her out.

Glamouring was the simplest solution, but it didn't work. It didn't work because she was wearing the damned necklace *he'd* given her.

He could snatch it off. He could…

His wine glass glittered in his palm. If he could get her to drink it, he could lay claim to her. An ancient, cruel law, but one that Zera upheld.

And he really liked pissing her off.

He didn't want to snatch the necklace. It would be hard to convince her to take it back afterwards. A drink was the best option. She might not even be chosen—

"Would you like a drink?" he asked, amazed at how controlled his voice sounded, how confident.

"I don't drink," she told him, her eyebrow arching. "Are you… flirting with me? Because a minute ago you were telling me to leave. Less than a minute, actually—"

She didn't drink. She wasn't going to take it. Valerian could be arriving at any minute. She had to drink. She had to—

There was only one way he could force her to drink, and he already hated himself for it.

He downed his entire goblet, flung it away, and marched towards her, shoving his mouth against hers.

He had dreamed of kissing her for over a year, but never in all of his imaginings had he thought it would be like this; forceful and bitter and rigid, her body tensing underneath his as he shoved the wine into her mouth. In all of his dreams, she was kissing him back.

Wrong. So wrong.

He wished she could have slapped him harder.

But the bargain was made, and she was saved. Safe from the sacrifice. "His" for a period of seven months.

When she collapsed in his arms, and he was forced to smile and turn to the court and laugh, acting like he wished she'd put up more of a fight, he hated himself as he had never done before.

And she was sure to hate him too.

He'd taken away her freedom. There was no way she would ever forgive him.

He took her back to the Underworld, escorted her to the guest room, and thought about what to do next. He could glamour her, making her quiet and calm, ensuring she couldn't actively hate him or look at him with those

eyes that used to brim with joy. He could make it seem to her that she was never there at all.

And yet he couldn't. He wasn't sure why not, whether it was because he couldn't stand to take another freedom from her or because he was simply too damn curious. He had to speak to her. He had to know her. He had to give her a chance of getting to know him.

It was selfish, but he told himself he would give her the option later, and kept telling himself that as he slowly glamoured the room to look a little more like hers. Not enough so that it looked like he had seen it, but enough to maybe bring her a little bit of comfort.

It took him ages to drum up the courage to speak to her, to *really* speak to her, now that there was no glamouring her into forgetting the day, now that she knew everything, or close enough. Now that he was a trapped monster, exposed, with nowhere to run or hide.

Every interaction in those first couple of weeks was torture. He felt sick to his stomach whenever he looked at her, and every terse word or glimmer of fear made him want to pitch himself into the Styx.

But every faint whisper of a smile had him caving in, lost to that drop of sunshine, tugged under like riptide.

He didn't dare desire more from her, and he wasn't good at making friends. Flirting though, that he could do. He'd watched enough of it growing up. He knew he could be funny, even charming, when the occasion called for it.

And yet she made him so unbearably nervous, it almost broke him before they could become anything like friends.

He couldn't believe his luck. She *liked* him. He wasn't sure how much, but she liked him. She smiled at him, laughed *with* him. Reached for him, held her hand in his.

And he loved her more than ever.

He searched for things to dislike, like her terrible singing or appalling taste in wine, but far too often his gaze would fall to her features, and he'd offer a silent prayer to the only goddess he worshipped. *I like everything about you. I'd like to find something that I don't like. Something that would break this spell you hold me under.*

But nothing did. Nothing *could.*

On the Solstice, they'd touched each other's ears. She'd clung to his hand to steady him when he was worried, she *said* that she liked him, joked about it like it was nothing, when it meant the entire world to him. She saved

him from being crushed under the hydra, cleaned his wounds afterwards, held him through his nightmares. Never prying, always caring.

After that night, he was fairly sure she wanted to kiss him, but he was terrified of acting on that impulse and losing her good graces. It took nearly dying for him to drum up the courage. And when she kissed him back, he felt simultaneously like he could die happy whilst being absolutely sure that he couldn't die at all, not while she still walked the Earth. Not when he had something worth living for. She was every good dream he'd ever had.

He felt like she was the needle and he was the thread, like she had tugged him loose from the spool he'd been wrapped around his entire life. She'd shot off, and he had no choice but to follow her until he was utterly and completely unravelled, hoping desperately she'd stitch him to whatever she was making.

How much deeper could he possibly fall for her? Every time he thought he'd reached his limit she'd say something or do something and he'd find himself on another ledge, staring at the unfathomable depths of his affection for, wondering how far he had left to go and how much it would hurt when he was there without her.

If this is all we have, if a few months with her in the underworld is all I get, it's enough. I won't ask for more. I won't be greedy. I just have to savour the time we have. It's not over yet, it's not over yet…

But he knew, even then, that no amount of time with her would be enough, and when she left, some great chasm would rip open inside of him. If he was stitched back together, it would be a miracle, and it wouldn't be the same. Nothing ever would be the same after she left.

And then he ruined it, by waiting too long to find a way to tell her about her mother, by not finding the right way to apologise. Or the time.

Maybe she had just needed time, and everything would have been fine. She'd kissed him back, when they were trapped in the cavern. She'd seemed reluctant to let him go, even though she told him she hated him not long before.

But she could lie.

"I'm never letting you go."

How impossible mortals were, with their strange tongues. How hard it was to know when they were earnest. He'd believed her when she said that she loved him, at least, eventually, but people fell out of love all the time, and mortals more than most.

"You're dreaming again," said a voice in the dark.

He knew the voice, but he didn't want to open his eyes, didn't want to be dragged out into the day. He wanted to sink back into the oblivion of sleep, where Persephone resided.

No, no, don't let me wake up…

"Open your eyes, little Hades," said the voice again. "We've got another day of games for you…"

Phoebe was standing before him, her bright face fixed in a cruel sneer. Her skin bore the radiance of moonlight, but everything about her was cold. "Get him up," she hissed to Rhea, and the Queen of the Titans came forward to heal him, just enough to get him standing.

Phoebe dragged him out, bound and chained, and threw him in the arena before the massive stone throne of Kronos.

He was a being of stone and oak, impossibly tall and strong, a mountain made human… or perhaps the mountains were modelled after him.

The ancient king stroked his chin, and summoned Iapetus to his side, the cruellest of his companions and a creature who looked at weapons like a sculptor looked at tools.

But there was nothing in Hades left to feel fear. Nothing much left in him at all. They'd scooped that out weeks ago. It was only from dreaming that he knew some fragments of him were left within his fragile shell.

Iapetus selected the whip. A mild weapon for him. Oh well, it was still early.

Pain lashed across Hades' back, faint and faraway, like it was happening to someone else. Perhaps it was. He'd grown deaf to the cracks, deaf to everything, everything aside from the thin memory of Persephone.

Persephone, Persephone. Safe and alive, somewhere far beyond him. He thought of her arms and her smile and her laugh and her kiss, submerging whatever remained of himself beneath those wounded thoughts.

He knew the blood was running down his back like syrup, knew the flesh beneath was flayed to the point of barely containing skin at all. The whip rose again, striking *two, four, six* more times.

He no longer felt it. His body was numb. He'd been pushed past the point of pain.

He laughed instead, his mouth tasting like copper.

Kronos snarled. "Why does he *laugh*?"

"Because it doesn't matter what you do to me," Hades replied. "Break my body. Tear me apart. Mist my bones or make me wear them as trinkets. You can have my body, but not the rest of me. I gave it all away, you see…"

“He’s delirious,” Phoebe groaned.

“No,” said Rhea, standing quietly beside him, ready to fix him to be ready again for the next round of entertainment, “he’s in love.”

Love, love, love. The word had pushed past meaning, had never held enough to explain what she was to him. She wore his soul as a necklace round her heart. All he ever was was hers.

“I won’t help you,” he told them. “And you can’t hurt me if you can’t hurt her.”

“Can’t I?” Kronos sneered. “We shall see.”

PART
2

It has been six weeks since Hades fell into Tartarus, six weeks since I sealed him in there, and we are no closer to opening it again.

A week after he disappeared, Zera returned in full force. She fought the resurrected Cerberus I'd left there and took control of the gate. She can't open it, but she'll know if we try to, and be ready to slip in with us and unleash the power of the Titans she craves.

"Let her forces stay there," Artemis advised. "They can't go anywhere. We have them surrounded."

We let them stay there to spare our own soldiers, which were not numerous. Every day Zera sends down more, while our own dwindle. The skeleton warriors bear the brunt of the attacks, but Zera's forces are slowly grinding them down. My mother can mend living bone, but dead bone is harder to fix. I repaired several with wire and super glue last week.

It is about all I am good for.

Despite inheriting a little of her healing power, I struggle with anything serious, or numerous, and despite training daily with Artemis and Apollo, my fighting skills still leave a lot to be desired, as do my skills as a Hades.

Hades.

It is not my name. And not my role.

No wonder I'm so bad at it.

Re-animating the dead seems to come naturally to me, but nothing else does. When the palace was suddenly flooded with people, one of the first things I was asked to do was create more rooms. Hades did it all the time, whisking them out of air.

I couldn't. I can't. I didn't understand. I'd managed to create a door earlier in the day, but I couldn't pull these rooms into existence. None of the other faeries can manipulate their residences. They are at a loss to help me.

Artemis got very impatient, eventually barking at me to at least summon some blankets and beds for her hunters. I managed that—just. I remembered Hades saying he summoned forgotten things, things that

wouldn't be missed, and I made myself think of army surplus shops, abandoned campsites.

I summoned everything I could, but Artemis was not satisfied.

"How come you can do that and not rooms?"

"Artemis, give it a rest," said Emetria, and I turned away from the rest of them, still hearing the ghost of her voice as I turned to Hades' room. "It's hard to create anything when you're breaking."

I shut myself away behind Hades' door, and didn't even make it to the bed before collapsing. Great, guttural sobs rose out of me. I felt like I was choking, like I could die from crying. My eyes fixed on the spots of colour hanging from his bed posts; the notes I'd fashioned into a mobile. I reached out to grab them—to grab some faint part of him—but this awful power rose up inside me and they collapsed into ashes.

My words to him. Gone in an instant, destroyed by the liquid surge of power flooding through my veins.

Emetria came in and held me as I vomited fire and tears.

I gave up my own room to the hunters, and made that one mine. The others set up beds wherever they could. My room, the dining room, the two spares Hades had summoned for our guests before… before. The palace is filled now. The throne room is our war room and our supply closet, the kitchen doubles as a mess hall. The mirror-room is being used as an infirmary. The only untouched room is the gardens, although even that is used for training.

It's a battleground.

I stripped apart his room in those first few days, searching for any sign of him, any faint trace of him clinging to the objects he'd left behind. Some remnant of him. A diary he'd kept. Writing with my name on. Something.

But there was nothing except a lingering scent of him on the sheets, which I scrubbed out within a matter of days, and a small box with a faded frayed ribbon, a thimble, and a battered copy of *Peter Pan.*

It had my name on the inside cover, in my childish handwriting.

I knew we'd met before. I couldn't remember it, but I knew. And during one of these visits, I'd given this to him.

And I suspected, the other things too, both worn through overuse.

My fingers trembling too much to summon, I ran into my old room, wrenching open the bedside drawer and yanking out my beautiful illustrated copy of *Peter Pan* that had been mysteriously gifted to me on my thirteenth

birthday. It was inscribed with the message, *Sometimes I wish you were the one that didn't grow up.* I had never been able to identify who it was from.

I could now. Stuffed into the drawer was a note Hades had sent me when he was running late.

Not dead. Dealing with a small cave-in. Try not to worry. I'll be back as soon as I can be.

It was the same hand.

He'd given this to me, back when he thought he was doomed to watch me age and die, never knowing, never thinking that I would come to love him too, that *I* would be the one to watch him go first.

My heart felt hollowed out. *He really did love me, didn't he?*

No. He *does* love me. He is still alive, and I am coming for him.

Grief revisits me every day. He dies each morning that I rise without him. Sometimes, in my darkest moments, I wonder if it wouldn't be better if he was just dead. Maybe by now I'd be past the worst of it. But he is not dead, and so no power on Earth will stop me trying to save him.

After that night, accelerated no doubt by the rising power of Hades, more and more of me started to change. The wound on my leg, inflicted by Dione, Lady of Revels, vanished. Old scars began to fade. New skin appeared, sealing away the person that I was, erasing her from existence.

I don't quite remember the morning when I didn't recognise myself in the mirror, but at one point I looked up and saw a stranger in the glass. My skin had been smoothed to the point of polished. It didn't look real, and felt like rubber. Any trace of my freckles were gone. My ears ended in tiny points, and my eyes, which had once been hazel, were now flecked with violet, like amethysts on the forest floor.

I should have been thrilled. I was as beautiful as the rest of them, now.

But I wasn't me.

"You can glamour your freckles back, if you like," said Emetria helpfully, when she saw me tugging at my skin in the mirror. "You can look however you wish."

But it wasn't the same. It *isn't* the same.

The other person I was had vanished too, all the softness of mortal Sephy shrivelling up the moment Hades fell. If anyone was ever asked to describe me at school, they used the words "nice" and "kind." Sephy was the sort of person who helped you understand your work when you didn't want to ask the teacher, who'd share her chocolate with you, who invited everyone to her birthday. It annoyed me a bit when I was about thirteen, that

no one could find anything else to say about me. And I didn't *feel* that kind. It wasn't like I did loads of work for charity or had big plans to save the world.

But Grandma said that being kind was an underrated trait, that I should never underestimate the ripple of a good deed.

I am not good any more. I have no softness, no kindness, no patience. I can rip up a goblin and feel *nothing.* I can snap at people and be devoid of guilt. I have been snipped away from my old self.

I wonder if I can claw some of it back when we get him home, or if that part of me is lost forever. I wonder how *he* managed it, how he managed to be good and kind in a world that had shown him so little.

There is a knock on the door.

"Training session. Be quick."

Artemis. I can never work out if I like her abruptness or not. It beats the way some of the others tip-toe around me, but another part of me is angered by it.

Mind you, anger is better than sorrow, and I don't tend to think about Hades when I'm being pummeled.

Training is how I spend a lot of my time, in-between resurrecting skeletons and being schooled in lore by Emetria. Artemis was supposed to teach me as well, but assuming I'd be just as poor at history as I am at training, she delegated this to her second. Hippolyta, irritated at having been given such a menial assignment, promptly delegated it further, giving the job to a mortal huntress by the name of Peony. It turns out her history is better for having had to learn it once herself. She's a kind instructor, but I can tell she's a little… apprehensive around me. A lot of the hunters are. Many of them were there in the first few days before my powers settled, and keep looking at me like I'm about to burst into flames again. I think I prefer fear to disappointment, but only marginally.

Artemis is waiting for me in the corridor, wearing a sweeping gown of soft blue, but the tight weave of the bodice gives the appearance of armour, as does the thick belt at her hips. Nothing she wears can ever make her look any less of a warrior. She charges into the armoury, not looking back, barely even waiting until I've crossed the threshold before tossing me a staff and attacking me with her own. Three of her hunters join in, and I'm made to fight all four of them at once. I don't win, of course. Artemis sighs, bowing out and letting me work with just three instead. This keeps going until I'm

fighting only one. Not a victory, a punishment. A way of highlighting how weak I am. It's only me and Peony now.

She grew up in London, like me, the daughter of a wealthy Japanese diplomat. She enjoys flowers. That is where the similarities between the two of us end. Peony is a small, willowy thing, with dark hair and a tiny, rosebud mouth. She was born in 1903, and joined Artemis' hunters to escape an arranged marriage. As long as she stays with the hunters, she will not age.

She is still mortal, not as strong or as fast as any other faerie, but she's had a hundred years to hone her skills. I've had weeks.

"Faster, Persephone," snaps Artemis.

I try to be faster. I try to be more lethal, to push power into every blow. But Peony dodges nearly all of it, eventually tripping me up and pinning me to the floor.

I could probably get out of it. I have the strength. But I'm not bothered by winning. I'm not bothered by anything.

"I yield," I cough out.

Peony glances at Artemis, but her expression is tight.

"I said, *I yield*."

The spear is still tight against my throat.

"I yield!"

I kick Peony off me, sending her spiralling through the air. She skids to the floor like a cat.

Artemis flips the weapon from the floor with her foot and flings it in my direction. "You did not need to yield."

"I wanted to."

"Do not pretend to be weak," she says, her steely eyes flashing. "It does not become us."

I don't need to pretend.

"Ten laps," she says.

"Forget it." I barge past her. I'm not in the mood.

"You will never grow stronger if you don't train."

"I *am* training. It's not making any difference!"

A tiny hand tugs at my skirt. "No shout," says a little voice.

Diana, Artemis' daughter. She's five, apparently, which from what I can gather is the equivalent of mortal two or three. She arrived with a band of reinforcements over a month ago, running into her mother's arms and clinging to her like they were welded together. I've not questioned why she thought it wise to bring a child into the Underworld, much like I don't

question why she's in a room full of sharp objects. Faerie children, from what I can gather, are seldom excluded from anything and treated like tiny adults, or ignored altogether. There's no one else for them to play with.

She's the only person that can make Artemis smile, and the only person to make me feel anything like guilt.

"I'm sorry," I say, dropping to her level. She reminds me a little of my cousin Henry, only he's *actually* five and way louder than she is. "I didn't mean to get cross."

"Did," she says. "Not nice to shout."

"No," I agree. "It's not."

Apollo gets up from the corner where he's been polishing his sword and pretending not to pay attention. In complete contrast to his sister's wardrobe, he is usually found wearing a white shirt and faded jeans, a style that he assures us has been in fashion for over fifty years, although the shirts are on the ruffly side. Occasionally, he wears the loose, flowing robes of ancient Greek design. There is no in-between.

"Forgo the running," he says. "She can give me a lap of the Underworld instead."

I wish I had the energy to smile at him gratefully, but at best I manage a half-hearted glance.

Artemis dismisses me with a nod. I pat Diana on the head, following Apollo out. "Thank you," I manage.

"Think nothing of it."

Apollo is still making up for the fact he didn't try to rescue Hades when he had the chance. Five weeks ago, he half-dragged me out of the palace and into the Underworld. It was the first time I had been outside in days.

"Time to see if you can use those wings, girl," he said.

"How can you teach me?"

He flexed his arms and a huge pair of white wings flipped out behind him. There was something in his posture which made me think he was used to people admiring them, but his expression was a mask of shame.

I stared at him. "You can fly."

"I can."

"When… when Hades fell, why didn't you—"

Apollo looked down. "We needed the way closed. That wasn't going to happen unless Zera ordered it, or…" Or Hades *died.* He faced me, shame stark in his expression. "You can hit me, if it makes you feel better."

I did hit him. I *pummelled* him. I fought like a cat made of steel, sharp and hard, no skill, only fury. I punched him until his face was bloody and bruised, and my hands split to ribbons.

Artemis would have been thrilled, if she was watching.

But he did not fight back, and it did not make me feel any better.

Learning to fly did, if only a fraction. When I was training, I felt nothing. When I was flying, I felt close to Hades. Closer. He was a little less far away from me.

It took me two weeks to get the hang of flying, to move in a straight line other than all over the place. I managed not to fall in the Styx like Hades once told me he did, but there were a couple of close calls. On one of the occasions, I saw the green waters rushing up to greet me, and felt this sudden rush, a commingling of panic and relief. The desire to do as he did or let the waters take me, I wasn't sure.

But at the last moment, I remembered the feeling of the insubstantial claws raking against my skin, and refused to fall, refused to surrender. I flapped my wings and soared upwards, disappearing into a cavern Hades had taken me half a dozen times. I thudded to the ground, and something new thrummed within me. Not quite power. Something softer and resolute. A name. It beat within me like a second heart.

Persephone Serra Lore.

Apollo dropped beside me, staring at my face.

"I know that look," he said. "Your true name just came to you, didn't it?"

I gasped, struggling for breath. I felt like my chest had been hollowed out and replaced with hummingbirds. "I… I didn't know… that that's what it was like."

Apollo regarded me carefully for a moment. "No, I don't suppose you would. I daresay your mother didn't even think you would have one, or thought you too old not to know it, by now."

"How… how does it work? Why did I—"

"A moment of intense emotion," he said. "Usually hits around puberty, which I guess you're kind of going through again, turning all fae and such…"

A moment of intense emotion. I wondered what Luliver's was. I wondered if it came to him while his mother was beating him. I had a feeling he knew it young in life; he'd given it to my mother.

Persephone Serra Lore. Hades had Lore as part of his name, too.

“Have people ever shared true names before?” I asked Apollo.

“Spouses sometimes share them as wedding vows, an ultimate act of trust.”

“I meant, are the names ever the same?”

Apollo shrugged. “How would I know? The only one I know is my own. Not enough people share them to work that out.”

For a while, I said nothing, trying to wrap my head around this knowledge, this feeling, this part of me carved outwards.

“You want to go back now?” Apollo asked eventually. “We should have a drink to celebrate. You’re a true faerie now.”

“I’m not in the mood.”

“No, I suppose not.” He held out his hand, but I got up by myself. “When I heard my true name, Artemis was so intensely jealous that it actually caused *hers* to trigger as well. I have forgiven her for making me share my spotlight. She has yet to forgive me.”

It was funny. I should have laughed.

But I couldn’t.

Laughter was a thing that happened to other people, in other lives, as foreign to me as a language I’d heard only once in childhood, and had no desire to learn. Hearing it in other people hurt.

It still hurts.

“Ready?” says Apollo, and I am stirred from stale thoughts, jolted back to a present I have little desire to be in.

I nod at him, summoning my wings, and launch into the air. Muscles beat behind me, and I cut free from the world. I don’t wait to see if Apollo is behind me. I’m soaring high above the Styx, untethered, streaming through the endless caverns. Zera’s troops are nowhere to be seen on my route. I know they’re somewhere, but I don’t want to fight today. I want beauty. I want peace.

I close my eyes and imagine.

I can’t keep them closed for long without risking crashing into a wall, so I open them again, misjudging the distance and having to drop down into a hole to avoid colliding into a stalactite the size of a pillar. I tumble my landing, wrapping my wings around me to avoid slicing my skin against the rocky floor.

Not that it would take long to heal.

I stay still for a moment, breathing heavily, checking for any wounds. The thick bronze feathers of my wings have shielded bone and muscle from

harm. I feel winded and bruised, but otherwise fine.

"Are you all right?" calls a voice in the gloom.

I freeze. It's not Apollo's voice. I don't recognise it as any of the hunters, either. It's male, soft, cool. I feel like I *should* know it, but it's unfamiliar.

"Who's there?" I ask. "Show yourself."

I draw my golden rapier, my celestial weapon. It comes to me whenever I bid it, as long as it's not held in the grip of another or imprisoned on another plane. When it was Hades' it was a broadsword. I am not proficient in it yet, but I know it marks me as one of the eleven members of the High Court, and a formidable force.

The voice seems to shudder, and a cloaked figure at the end of the tunnel scurries behind the rocks.

"If you mean no harm to me, reveal yourself," I continue, drawing towards them. "I shall not harm any defenceless creature."

"I imagine you might feel differently, if you saw my face," the figure says. "So many others have."

I recognise the voice shortly before I reach him, before the hood falls away to reveal a rotted, skeletal face.

"Charon."

The Ferryman, guardian of lost souls. He has patrolled these waters for centuries, serving every Hades since the creation of the role. And he betrayed us when Zera offered him humanity, a desire I'm sure he regrets.

It came with a price. He's mortal on the inside, with the same fears and desires, but he retains his disturbing form. The last time I saw him, he was howling in horror at his own hands, with no way of glamouring his appearance away like he used to.

"My Lady," he said, bowing his head. "I am so—"

"You can spare me your apology. I don't want it."

"I didn't know. I didn't know what it was I did. I couldn't feel like you, how was I to know—"

"The same way every other human does," I spit. "You don't have to feel everything to understand that it is wrong."

"But I felt *nothing*. Nothing, for two thousand years—"

"Then you should have known better than any of us!"

He shakes his head. "No one should live that long," he whispers hoarsely, "the mind is not made for it. You cannot understand what is like to have done what I have done, and care."

I swallow. “You’ll forgive me if I’m not sad you’re suffering.”

“You have a right to be angry. Every right. You have a right to want revenge.” His empty eyes turn to the tip of my rapier. I wonder if it will burn him like it burns other faeries.

I’m worried I want to find out, and I yank it back before the temptation sinks its teeth in.

“Please,” he says, scuttling towards the point. “Please, take your revenge. I deserve it. It’s all I can give you. I didn’t want to hurt you. Or him. I just wanted to feel… and I’ve felt enough.”

He clutches at the hem of my dress, and despite it all, despite how much I want to hate him, I feel something else. I pity him.

But he’s also the reason Hades is gone.

“Feel more,” I tell him, and turn away.

His sobbing rattles down the tunnel, clawing at my bones. I hear him stumbling over to a nearby pool, and when he catches his reflection, he wails.

“I can’t live like this,” he weeps.

I pause, because that is a feeling I know all too well. And no matter how easy it is to heap the blame on him, sometimes, in the night, I blame myself for sneaking out. Or my mother for locking me in. The Ferryman hadn’t expected her. If we’d gone together—

He alone had made the conscious decision to put me in danger and force Hades’ hand, but rarely does something awful rest on the shoulders of one person alone.

“I cannot forgive you,” I say sharply. “But perhaps…”

I hold out my hands, sweeping them loosely in his direction. I imagine the face of the young man he wore, dark-haired, handsome, sharp. I imagine it until it appears in front of me, and I plaster it onto his form, welding it down to his bones. Charon looks at his reflection and gasps, putting a hand up to his face.

“Thank—”

“Don’t,” I say. “It probably won’t even last. I’m just giving you a short reprieve. Make of it what you will.”

I spread out my wings again, and shoot up out of the tunnel. I try not to think about how grateful he looked, or how strong I felt that glamour was; the strongest I’d managed to conjure. Had I wasted it? Why had I done it in the first place?

Because, for that one moment, I felt a little bit more like myself.

In the main cavern, Apollo swoops beside me. “There you are!” he says. “I was worried you might have fallen into danger.”

“I can handle it,” I tell him, although that’s probably a lie. I can take on a few lighter enemies, but I would struggle with anything large or numerous. That being said, we haven’t seen any ogres or giants, recently. Perhaps Zera’s forces are wearing thin.

That should please me. It does. It’s one step closer to being able to safely open the way to Tartarus. But all I can think about is, if we’re finally wearing *her* down, how is Hades faring, by himself, in that place?

I have no way of knowing what’s beneath the ground, if it’s a pit of fire and sulphur, or a desert wasteland. I don’t know if he’s alone or hurt or safe.

Be safe, be safe.

I only know he’s not here, that he hasn’t managed to come back himself, and that if I don’t get him back soon I’m going to go insane.

I feel stupid for feeling sorry for Charon. His pain is nothing. He deserves everything he gets.

Apollo glides ahead of me, trying to catch my gaze. “You all right?”

I keep my gaze firmly fixed ahead of me. “Fine.”

“See, I think I’m getting the hang of this mortals-can-lie thing, and I’m not convinced.”

I say nothing.

“It’s impressive, you know. You still being able to lie. When you heard your true name, I thought the lies would stall. But they didn’t. And the celestial steel still doesn’t burn you either, does it?”

“No.” It merely hummed against my skin. I hadn’t cut myself on it yet, although sometimes it was tempting. A single scar to remind me that some part of me was still human. But just the thought made me think of Hades and his ruined back, and all kinds of guilt came rushing in at that. “But I’m not as fast or strong or powerful as the rest of you either.”

“Those things might change.”

“Not fast enough.”

I spur on ahead of him, not stopping until the doors of the palace are racing up to meet me. I drop to the ground and hurry inside. People swarm around to welcome us back, checking for injuries or updates. I ignore them as Apollo is swept away, several of the hunters giggling around him as if they've suddenly been turned into nymphs.

Actually, I think some of them *are* nymphs.

I have not been paying a lot of attention.

Old Sephy would have. There's perhaps fifty people in our ranks, at the moment. I have more than fifty classmates. Old Sephy would know all their names. She'd know something about each of them. A favourite lesson, a best friend, a song they liked, a family member.

I glance back at them. I think the green-skinned girl is Veradine. And the dark-skinned warrior with midnight hair and a silver circlet is Hippolyta, Artemis' second. A few other names dribble to mind. Festus, Bella, Iason. Davia? Delia?

I don't know. I don't know these people.

And I'm not sure I care that I don't, either.

At least I remember Peony, who is hovering outside my door, holding out a lemon cupcake decorated like the sun. She does this from time to time, brings me beautifully presented bits of food, or flowers she's found in the garden.

"Hey," she says, holding up her offering. "I brought you cake. Apollo made them earlier. I managed to get you one that didn't have his face on."

That's funny, and somewhere, I feel an urge to laugh or snort, but it doesn't quite make it to the surface, much like the desire to ravage that cupcake that two months ago I would have devoured.

"Thank you," I say, taking it from her hands and licking the frosting, hoping it will summon my appetite. I feel the sweet tang of the lemon, but I don't taste it. Or maybe it's the other way around. "You don't need to bring me offerings, you know. I won't set you on fire if you're not nice to me."

"I'm not afraid of being set on fire," she says. "I just wanted to apologise for not letting up earlier, during our spar. I should have looked to you, and not to Artemis."

"Because I outrank her?" I suggest, even though it sounds ludicrous. While Emetria has declared me a queen by ancient right, Artemis is a *goddess.* In skill and years, if not in reality.

"Because you didn't want to fight."

I shrug it off. "Artemis is right, though. I have to train."

“We all have our limits.” She doesn’t say the next part. *Some less than others.* I’m aware my limit is less than everyone else’s. Even Peony’s stamina, with her mortal body, is better. I need to stop making excuses.

“Thanks for the cake,” I tell her, and duck into my room, just as Emetria comes striding down the hall. I close the door before she can reach me.

In some ways, it seems impossible to see her as anyone’s mother. She looks too young to be mine, with her ageless, unlined face and flawless skin. There’s a softness there, but it looks moulded. All of her looks moulded, from the curls of her hair to the power in her stride. I think of Grandma with her soft cardigans and warm arms, or Libby’s mum with her kitchen bursting with spices, who would faff and fuss and twitter in Punjabi under her breath, worrying that I wasn’t eating enough.

But then other times, it’s all so very clear whose mother Emetria is.

“Are you all right?” she asks through the door.

I nearly spit, *because you’ve cared about me so much before now,* but I rein it back in at the last minute. Because the truth is, I know she cares. I know she always has, that she had reasons for abandoning me, for staying away.

I know that. And in principle, I’ve forgiven her.

There’s a difference between feeling a thing, and knowing it.

Hades would have understood. He would have understood why I hated myself for being pissed off with her, why I couldn’t stop doing either.

“I’m fine,” I snap, biting back the word *mum,* because if I ever call her that, I don’t want the first time to be in anger.

“Apollo says you—”

“I ran into the Ferryman,” I tell her, partly just for something to say.

She does quiet for a moment. “I see,” she says eventually. “Did you… do you want to talk about it?”

Maybe. Possibly. I don’t know. I want to know why I helped him, why I don’t hate him as much as I should, or why I helped him in spite of that.

I want to know so many things about myself.

Before all this, I thought I knew who I was. I thought I rather liked her. Now I have no idea. Losing Hades, becoming queen, turning fae… it’s torn my old self to ribbons. I’m a deft hand with a needle, but I have no idea how to stitch myself back together.

“Not right now,” I tell her, which is probably the truth.

The whisper of a sigh on the other side of the door. “When you’re ready,” she says, “I will be here.”

I nod, no strength left in my voice, and wait until she’s moved away. I strip my armour, moulded around my body, the pliable leather fashioned to look like feathers. I dump them in my closet and haul my dress off, too. My fingers eke out Hades’ clothes. They should have vanished; the wardrobe only shows me the clothes that I desire, but I suppose I desire to cling onto his. The dark shirts, the velvet doublets, the feathered ruffs and the steel-capped boots. Everything black and midnight and stitched with constellations.

Nothing smells of him. The cleaning magic has stolen it away.

Not forever, not forever, I remind myself, because the alternative is far too frightening.

I pull on a loose, ink-blue dress with a bodice studded with stars, and lie on the bed staring at the dark ceiling. I pull *Peter Pan* from the bedside table and thumb through the pages, not really reading, just wondering which thumbprints are mine and which are his. I trace my name in the front cover, thinking of the child I was, wishing I could go back and tell her to hold onto that boy, not to forget him, not to leave him, not to let him go.

Too late. Always too late.

I give up on the book, and my eyes fall to my sewing basket in the corner. I haven’t sewed since he fell. I can usually fix things with magic, and I don’t have the imagination for anything else, but I suddenly have the desire to use my needle. I don’t need to create anything.

I find myself a scrap of fabric and start practising my stitches. Nothing more. I focus on that and nothing else, letting the rest of the world bleed away. A bell sounds for dinner, but I ignore it. Cross-stitch, blanket stitch, hemming stitch…

I get out another piece of fabric and embroider my name. Then his. I try to make a feather that blooms like a flower, but I mess it up. I go back to words. Simple. More ordered.

Four words tug themselves from my needle.

I am not OK.

I stare at the thread as if I expect it to rearrange itself into something new. It stares back, immovable.

I am not OK.

Not OK.

“You don’t have to be.” That’s what Hades would say, right? He’d tell me it was all right to cry, to hurt, to feel. He would have been harder on himself, and I would have told him otherwise.

He would have found a way to make me feel like it was all right, even if he couldn’t say it.

“I am not OK,” I whisper to the darkness. “But somehow, I am going to be.”

There’s a knock on the door. Emetria, again. I stuff away my embroidery as if she can see through walls.

“Persephone? You missed dinner. I’ve brought something for you.”

“I’m not—”

“Sephy, you need to eat.”

“I’m fine.”

She sighs. “My dear, you may be half-mortal, but I am your mother. I am becoming very good at knowing when you’re lying. Eat.”

I let her in, because she’s right, and I do need to eat, I just don’t enjoy it at all. Flavour has been leached from the world.

She hands me a warm bowl of yellow, beige and brown.

“Is that… cheesy mash potato with gravy?”

She nods, closing the door behind her, and crossing to the bed. “Pure calories, which is what you need. One of many, many of the comfort foods I picked up at university.”

“You’ve been to university?” I sit down beside her.

“Eighteen times and counting.”

“Why?” It’s a ludicrous amount. Obscene.

“For the same reason everyone else does. To learn. To experience.”

“Don’t you already know everything you need to know?”

She laughs. “No one knows that, although, yes, generally speaking I know more than the lecturers. But I always learned something. And it grounded me, living among these young, fresh students with their lives all open in front of them… I wouldn’t change a moment of it.

“When did you last go?”

She pauses. “Warwick, back in the eighties.”

“Dad went to Warwick then.”

“I know,” she says, smiling knowingly.

“Did you… did you know him?”

“We had a class together. Nothing happened between us. He was so young, after all. But fifteen years later we met again. He was older. Smarter.

Funnier. And those glasses…" She sighs for a minute. "Didn't remember me, of course. But it was lovely to see him again, to know him differently."

"Did you love him?"

"Yes," Emetria says slowly, "but not enough. Not enough to let him in and share my life, let alone my soul. But enough to miss him when he was gone. Enough to love you a little more for being his child too."

I don't know what to say to that, but my chest tightens.

"I'm not really one for romantic relationships," she carries on. "I've had lovers, through the ages, but I've always been very happy with my own company. I'm happy to share my time with people, but less so my life. Of course, I would have made the exception for you."

I pause, shovelling the potato into my mouth to fill the silence. "It's good," I say, not really tasting anything. The best I can manage is that it's hot.

She smiles. "I ate almost nothing but potatoes the first three months you lay inside me. Faeries are immune to most things, but not morning sickness, did you know? Potatoes were about the only thing I could stomach. No wonder you were such a chunky baby!"

"Was I?" There are no photos of me as a newborn.

She nods, every part of her grinning. "The fattest. And such a giggler, too. I had no idea babies that young could giggle quite so much. Sweet enough to eat!"

Dad and Grandma talk a lot about when I was a baby, but learning about before I was born is… strange. I never thought I'd ever find out.

"What… what was it like? Finding out you were pregnant?"

"Terrifying," she says, with a strange smile. "And then utterly magical. When you've been childless for as long as I have, it feels like a ghost of a dream; the sort of thing that's just never going to happen. And then suddenly it did, and I felt completely unprepared."

"How old are you?" It seems ridiculous I don't know, that I've never thought to ask.

"Six-hundred-and-fifty," she replies, not skipping a beat. I've heard it's rude to ask a faerie's age, but she doesn't seem to mind. "Give or take a few years."

"Wow," I say, "that's… wow."

I think of all she must have seen in those centuries, all she must have done. The stories she must have. The experiences. I have a hundred questions, but none of them reach my mouth.

I wonder how long I have to live now. No one seems to be able to come up with an answer for that. I wonder if there's a way of finding out, or if we just have to wait and see if my ageing slows.

I wonder what I will see, if I live that long.

"Anything you want to ask, I will answer," Emetria says. "I've been waiting your entire life to talk to you, and your entire life… it has felt like both centuries and seconds to me." She leans across and kisses my cheek, and then readies herself to leave. "Don't forget to clear away your bowl when you're done."

I scowl at her, and she laughs. It would have been a good moment to call out, "yes, mum," but the moment I think to do so, it vanishes on my tongue.

The next morning, I go out on patrol with Apollo, Emetria, Peony, and a couple of other hunters called Hazel and Willa. I know them from sight, but I never bothered to learn their names before now. Willa is a blue-skinned pixie with wings like a butterfly. Hazel is part-faun. He has human legs, but two tiny horns protrude from his curly hair, and his arms are covered in the dense, spotted fur of a deer. I'm not sure of the rest of his heritage, but he's able to summon fire so maybe imp or one of the high fae.

He pipes a tune as we walk, designed to draw out our enemies. They might think we're distracted, but we're ready. Our weapons are drawn, none of us losing ourselves in the song, even when Willa's sharp, clear voice accompanies him.

"Long, long, long ago, a lover said to me,
Meet me by the river and we'll marry 'neath the tree.
But as midnight dawned, I heard a pretty sound,
He made his vows to another, now he's buried 'neath the ground."

It's a pretty song, despite its lyrics, and I'm half drawn to it myself. Faerie music can dance a mortal to death and I'm worried it's one part of me I'll never shake. I ought to be glad to have a reminder of my humanity, but I would have picked another trait over that one.

"You'll develop a resistance," says Peony, as if reading my thoughts. I keep forgetting she's mortal, that she has all of their weaknesses. "Sometimes I miss it, you know. The ability to lose yourself."

I say nothing to that, but I think I know what she means.

Apollo's hand grazes my arm. "Look alive," he says.

I pause, hearing nothing but the song, which Hazel and Willa keep up, although their eyes flicker too, registering something.

Peony shrugs. Our senses will never be as sharp as theirs.

Emetria holds her staff.

Four goblins leap down from above. Apollo fires upwards, striking one in the thigh. Emetria cuts another to the floor. My whip fastens around the

wounded one's ankle, and I yank it towards me, stabbing it in the chest before I can even think.

It's just as well. They are not alone.

A small horde of redcaps follows—larger, more vicious relatives of the goblins—and three armoured pixies. I can't count the total number. A dozen, maybe. Twice our numbers.

I've been in enough scrapes by now not to notice every detail. There's an impossible fastness, and my mind moves into this place between realities, neither absent nor conscious. Flashes pulse across my vision, of blood green and red, spraying against the walls, the floor, the ceiling. Limbs everywhere, fists of iron and blades of steel. The air tastes coppery, and the fleshy gurgle of blood-corrupted lungs streaks through it.

We group together, backs guarding, facing our enemies even as they scuttle down the cave walls like spiders. The part of me that remains unused to this wants to bolt, knows that I can fly, that I'm faster than the pixies. I can escape. I can be free.

But I'm tethered to my group, to my responsibilities, to the desire not to be a coward.

I've yet to learn to enjoy the fight, but I enjoy feeling human. I enjoy being reminded that I care about something.

A pixie strikes me in the leg, but her weapon bounces on my armour. I wrench it out of her grip and kick it away, grabbing her by the throat as she struggles towards it.

I crush her neck beneath my fingers. She's dead in seconds.

Later, I will fixate on the crunch of metal and bone. I will try to remember if I felt more than that, in the moment, if I felt some fragment of her soul slipping through my fingers.

I've done the same thing for weeks, and not yet found an answer.

A redcap lunges for me, but Emetria's staff knocks it down. She stabs it clean through, just as a goblin bites her shoulder. She lets out a harsh, low sound, ripping it from her back, and I plunge my rapier into it before it can rise. I don't quite meet my mark, and it squirms beneath my blade, spitting black blood.

I have to strike it twice more before it stills.

An ogre comes charging up the main tunnel, hitting Apollo clean across the chest and smacking him into a wall. His wings shrivel behind him, crumpling like paper. Peony leaps to his defence, but the ogre's club sends

her reeling across the floor. I grab its wrist with my whip before it can aim again, giving Hazel the opportunity to stab it under the arm.

It's not enough. It doesn't go deep. And this ogre is covered in thick, leather armour.

Apollo and Peony are moving, but too slow. Emetria is engaged. Hazel is desperately avoiding the wild swings of the ogre, and I can't keep my grip and defend myself at the same time.

"Willa!" I hiss. "Cover me!"

I unlatch my whip and rush for the ogre, leaping up its arm and swinging my legs around its neck. My rapier of celestial steel burns through the leather strap of his helmet, and I toss it to the floor, clinging on for dear life as it struggles to buck me off. My blade is too long to get a decent angle, and although it burns his skin with every slice, it cannot cut through bone.

I discard it, and smash my hands against its skull instead, with all the might of Hades. For a moment, my blood feels like fire.

Its bones shatter like glass, and it sways slowly to the floor.

I scramble out of the way before it hits, panting hard, still feeling like I'm burning. When a pixie rushes towards me, I hold out my hand and burn her face clean off in a plume of fire unlike anything I've ever seen.

Her screams are unlike anything I've ever heard either, but Apollo quickly stops them. He hauls me to my feet before I fixate on the sound.

There's no time to ask if I'm OK, but a quick glance and I know his words. We place our backs together and cut down anything that comes at us. The brawl blurs around me, fear and guilt and everything else dribbling away.

One by one, the number dwindles, battle cries replaced with hard, rugged breaths, until there is nothing left but us, the steady *drip, drip* of blood, and the low wail of the water.

"Is that it?" Peony gasps, an unsteady smile spreading across her face. "Artemis has done worse during training. That all they got?"

"Is anyone hurt?" Emetria asks. "Report."

"I'm fine," say Hazel and Willa, almost on top of one another.

"Always good, My Lady," replies Apollo, "in one way or another."

"Persephone?"

My voice is trapped, flowing down to the water's edge with the stream of blood. I watch the souls drifting in the current, and wonder how many I've added to it today.

I lost count some while ago.

You wanted power, Sephy. You wanted not to be weak and useless. Look around. Is this what you wanted?

No, no. I didn't want this. I didn't want to be a killer.

But I was. Even before now, I'd killed. To protect myself, to save him. I'd killed and I would do it again. I would be taken to the brink of everything.

Hades had told me once that he would do anything to keep me safe. As a faerie, he meant it. He would have done literally anything. I knew, even then, that there were some things I would not do. Evils I would not commit. People I would not hurt, not even for him.

But despite the blood and ichor seeping under my skin, I still knew that there was so much further I had yet to fall.

I told him I was only one tragedy away from becoming a supervillain.

You're my tragedy, Luliver.

"Sephy?"

"I'm all right," I say, because I know that's what I'm supposed to. So used to those who cannot lie, they do not question it.

"Why so many?" asks Hazel, moving tentatively up the tunnel. "It's been a while since we've seen a force like that."

"A good question," Emetria says, following him. Peony and Willa stop to strip the bodies.

"We should take the corpses back with us," Peony suggests, glancing up at me. "So you can…"

I wince. So I can reanimate them. Strange as it is, the flesh seems to drag them down. They make better warriors stripped down to their bones. How do we strip them, you ask?

The old fashioned way.

They've stopped asking me to help with that after I threw up three times. Now they present me with tidy boxes of bones, but the smell of the flesh seems to grow around them.

I am not a great Queen of Hell.

"Sephy?" Emetria calls back. "Are you coming?"

Leaving Peony and Willa to sort through the bodies, I follow the others up the trail. They stop shortly in front of a small, round chamber.

It houses weaponry, a few bunks, some crates of supplies, and a golden circle etched into the floor.

Emetria grins. So do the rest of the team.

It's a teleportation circle.

We knew there were others in the labyrinthine halls, other than the main one that Zera still had control of. We'd liberated one a few weeks ago, only to quickly lose it again.

Not this time.

"Apollo, fly back to Artemis. Have her send out as many hunters as she can."

He bows. "My Lady."

Hazel sets to work inspecting the supplies, chuckling with glee as he unearths casks of wine and other luxuries. I can summon most of the small things, and despite a few wild parties I took no part in, one thing we're not short on is wine. Still, I understand the joy of spoils of war.

Emetria's hands wave over the circle, and I see her mind whirl behind those violet eyes, a dozen plans doubtless forming in her mind. "This place will be swarming, soon," she says. "And I'll need to find a way of blocking incoming people, and fast, lest we're overwhelmed again."

I stare at her, not sure what I'm expected to say.

"You should go," she prompts.

"What?"

"I'm not talking about running away, I'm talking about going back to the mortal world. You have two days in the sun. Use one of them. Go smell real flowers, breathe real air. Just for a few hours."

I pause, wanting to contradict her, wanting to rally against it, to insist I don't want or need it.

But I do. I want it only slightly less than I want *him.* I need the feeling of sunlight against my skin.

"How… how does it work?"

"Just think of the place you want to go," she explains. "It will take you to the nearest teleportation circle."

"That easy?"

"That easy."

I step into the spot. She doesn't ask where I'm going. I could, of course, go anywhere. I could slide away to the seaside or the mountains, the deserts or the jungles, or to the gates of Olympus to scream at Zera's door.

But if this circle cannot take me to Hades' arms, there's only one other place I want to go.

I close my eyes. There is a hard whoosh of air, and the smell of earth is swallowed up by the smell of petrol and mown grass, the distant wailing of

the souls of the river replaced by the mechanical whir of the city. I reel beneath it, my legs wobbly.

Sun. Sky. The sound of children, the screech of tyres, the clicking wheels of pushchairs and prams.

Hyde Park. London.

Home.

I nearly step out of the glade before realising I'm still dressed in my armour and flecked with blood. Lesser fae have natural glamours that prevent mortals seeing them, but the high fae, who prepare to be seen, are visible unless they dispel themselves.

I flick my wrists, drawing on some old outfit from my life before, the first I think of. A loose white shirt, skinny jeans, floral-printed flats. At the last minute, I remember my face too, drawing on my former eyes, my freckles, softening my features and the tips of my ears. I look normal, ordinary, and yet the first thing that hits me as I step away from the glade—before the glare of the sun—is the feeling of how utterly and completely I do not belong here, amongst the laughing children and the chatty adults, next to runners and athletes and office folk on breaks.

I don't belong in the sun. My skin prickles under the heart of it.

The air around me feels all wrong, the sounds too sharp and loud, and my breath cracks against my chest like clay in a fire.

For a second, I can hardly breathe at all.

And then I see the bandstand.

It's like a lighthouse in a storm, only it cuts through the sky, and calms the airy waters around me. The world narrows to that point, and I am hit all at once with a memory as sharp and new as if it had happened seconds beforehand.

I was here with Hades, almost two years ago. It unfolds like a map, clear and crisp, unbroken by the years that should be stuffed between it. It was raining and early, the skies brushed with bronze. Beads of water clung to the trees like pearls. The world was wrapped in mist.

I sheltered from the drizzle, half only to stare.

And then Hades came.

I remember the feeling of everything inside widening and tightening, of being utterly overcome by this impossibly beautiful boy beside me, awed by the casual sway of his lithe body as he leant against the railing, his dark shirt damp with rain. I was certain I'd never seen anyone so lovely, half sure that some sort of joke was coming, that I'd wandered into a dream.

He spoke, and half the things he said made no sense, but I wanted to keep talking to him, certain he didn't want me to pry, that it would be rude to, but thinking or hoping that he wanted to talk to me, too.

That was the first time we met as Hades and Persephone.

He was here. We were here together.

I walk through the park, searching for other memories to unfold, and a few do. Not the first. But others. Eating ice cream with him. Playing on the zipline. I was about eleven. Not much younger.

Why not the first?

Because your mother glamoured those, I realise.

They're not unravelling because I'm no longer mortal. They're unravelling the same way physical glamours did when a person fell asleep.

Because the world thinks he's dead.

I hug the mark on my arm.

No. Not dead.

I wander on still, down the path he took me whenever he walked me home.

"I really like you."

"I like you, too!"

Only I didn't, I couldn't, like him the way he liked me, so clear in his young face, even back then. I want to scream at the me of yesterday. I want another memory of me holding him.

My feet stop. I'm standing in front of my flat.

I'm home, although it feels nothing like it.

I don't know what day it is, but it's morning. Dad's probably at the university, which is just as well, because if I see his face, if I hear his voice, my half-fae body is going to collapse into something unfixable.

I ring the buzzer, just in case.

Nothing.

I step around the corner and find the fire escape Libby used a hundred times to sneak up to see me. I leap up to the first level—a move I could never have managed as a human—and scurry up the steps to my roof garden, my pots in desperate need of a good trim. I rest my hands against my windowsill, and I'm hit again with another memory, of Hades tumbling into my room, scratched and bleeding, frightened.

"Boy, why are you crying?"

It unfolds as perfectly, as awfully, as all of the others. I can see the things he didn't say in every glance, in the fingers that trembled around

mine.

Go back to that time. Know him. Hold him.

The window is locked, but a bit of faerie magic soon fixes that. I crawl into my room. It is utterly unchanged, unspoilt, all white and pink, lace and gossamer.

It seems small and silly and girlish. The sheets don't smell right. Nothing smells right.

Home is not home.

My fingers glide over my desk, over the painted figurines of Disney princesses, over flowery hair clips and rarely used make-up. I search for the person I was before in every item, of the sweet, carefree child I used to be.

I feel like this is the room of a dead person, like Old Sephy is a phantom who clings to the gathering dust.

You did not fall alone into that hole, Luliver.

I click open my door and walk down my steps to the rest of the flat, crinkling my nose at the smell of stale coffee and old food. There's dirty dishes in the sink, mugs clutter the surfaces, and papers cover every surface of the main room. It's like a book has exploded.

Dad was pretty tidy, everything apart from his office kept in perfect order. Had he just kept it up for my sake? It's hard to believe it.

I pick up one of the papers. It's a map of Hyde Park, various areas circled. Other books are about faerie lore, pages about missing children marked.

Oh, Dad, what are you doing?

Something clicks against the door, and I freeze. I can race to the window. I can glamour myself invisible. He doesn't have to see me, doesn't have to know I was here—

But of all the people in the world, I do not want to run from him, no matter how impossible it will be to say goodbye again.

Dad walks into the flat, holding a bag of groceries.

His eyes seem to take forever to meet mine, and panic and dread swell inside me, waiting for the moment as he fiddles with his keys.

I swallow hard. “Dad.”

For a long, long second, nothing happens. I fit half our lives together into that moment. I am three years old, falling off my tricycle. He’s bandaging my knees. I’m five, and he presents me with my first book on Greek Myths. We stay up late, creating different endings. I’m nine, in my first play. Dad records the whole thing and brags to the other parents that I’m his.

I’m his, I’m his, I’m his.

I’m home.

Finally, he looks up, his eyes widening. His bag drops to the floor, ground coffee spilling everywhere. “Sephy,” he says, his voice like a phantom’s. He stares at me for so long I’m worried I’ve dropped my glamour, that he doesn’t quite recognise me.

Then he bolts from the spot and yanks me into his arms, trembling and solid all at once. “Oh God, Sephy, Sephy! Is it really you?”

I wrap my arms around his back and bury my face in his chest, barely able to hold in the tears. My heart is pounding. “It’s me,” I croak.

He grabs my face. “Are you hurt?”

“No, Dad, I’m fine. I’m not hurt.”

“Where have you been—”

“How do you… how do you even know that I’ve been—”

“Missing?” He half laughs, half chokes on the word. “Strangest thing. A few weeks ago I just started to think it was odd that I couldn’t remember hearing from you recently, and yet when I went to ring your number… I’d forget. Then other little things started to fall away. I couldn’t remember the name of the school you were supposed to be at. Imogen and Grandma started asking how you were… Eventually I remembered this young man coming to the flat—”

I flinch.

“Seph?” Dad’s voice goes hard. “Did he do anything to you? Because even when I remembered he seemed adamant that you’d be safe—”

“No, Dad, he didn’t hurt me. It’s not like that. It’s not like that at all. I’ve been safe. Or I was. With him.” I take a deep breath, steadying myself. I can’t explain Hades to Dad. I won’t be able to stop crying. “What’s all this?” I say instead, gesturing to the paper.

He scratches the back of his neck. “I’ve er, been trying to track you down. Or trying to track down someone who could tell me *something—”*

“You don’t have a secret way of contacting my mother?”

He recoils. “Your… your mother?”

It occurs to me he doesn’t know that I know. “I met my mother,” I explain. “I know everything now. What she is. What I wasn’t. And that… that you knew.”

Dad tenses. “Are you angry with me?”

I shake my head. I was, for a while, but that’s now buried now between other, worse feelings. “A bit. Not too much. I get why you felt you couldn’t tell me.”

“I wanted to,” he says. “So badly. I knew how much you wanted to know her. She gave me a way of contacting her in case… well, in case something like this happened. I’d thought so many times of writing to her and begging her to meet you. I never thought it was my secret, see. And I’d never have all of the answers. So I never did, not until I realised you were missing. I’ve not heard from her.”

“She’s… underground,” I say. Whatever method he had, she clearly didn’t have access to it right now. And perhaps Dad wasn’t high up on her list of priorities now that I was with her. “That’s not all,” I continue, gathering my nerve. “When I was… away, I started experiencing certain… changes.”

“Changes?”

I brace myself, dropping my glamour before my resolve falters. I keep my armour hidden, and the bloodstains. I think that might be too much for him. I’m already painfully aware of how little of the daughter he remembers is left. I’m not the helpless girl who left this home.

I’m not even human.

Dad says nothing, not even when I raise my violet eyes to his. “I’m not… I’m not exactly human any more.”

Slowly, he reaches up a hand to my cheek and thumbs away an errant tear. “You look plenty human to me, daughter.” He kisses my forehead.

“Beautiful.”

We fold into each other’s arms again, and stay there for a little while, not speaking.

“So,” he says finally, “where exactly have you been?”

I inch back. “The Underworld.”

“The… the Underworld?”

“Yeah, it’s um, a long story. But I was taken there to protect me, and it’s not as scary as it sounds. Not at all, actually. It’s… oddly beautiful. I was safe, Dad.”

“And, um, this boy…”

I freeze.

“That was Luliver, wasn’t it? Your mother brought him to meet you a few times—”

The fact that Dad remembers him, that he has memories of him that I don’t, that he calls him *Luliver,* rattles me in a way I’m not prepared for. “Yes,” I say, unable to explain anything more at the moment. “That was Luliver. Hades, now.”

“Right,” he says, trying not to sound too unnerved. “My daughter Persephone was kidnapped by the Lord of the Underworld. Nothing unusual about that at all.” He presses the bridge of his nose. What… what happened to you down there?”

I shake my head. “A lot, and it’s really hard to explain, but—”

“Well, we’ve got plenty of time!”

I flinch. The buzzer goes off, but we both ignore it. Dad’s eyes don’t leave mine.

“Seph? We’ve got time now, right?”

“Um, Dad, I have to go back.”

“Go back to the Underworld? Are you mad?”

“Not mad,” I say. “Just…” I roll back my sleeve, showing him my mark. He stiffens, and I know he knows something about what it means. Maybe he’s seen Emetria’s, or maybe there’s something about it buried under all of these papers. “I’m sort of Hades now,” I tell him.

“Hades? But how—”

“I can’t,” I explain, my voice cracking, “Dad, for real, I *can’t.* But I have to go back. Hades only gets two days above in a year. If I overstay, it’ll get… unpleasant, really quickly, and… I have to go back.”

He breathes sharply, running his hands down his face, and collapses onto the sofa. Paper crunches beneath him. “How long have you got?”

I slide down beside him. “I don’t know. A few hours, maybe. Emetria wasn’t exactly specific.”

“Right,” he says, carefully, solidly, and I wonder where his mind has gone, what he’s thinking of. He rubs his temples. “How are you finding her?”

“All right, I guess. It’s a bit weird. I’m not sure what to make of it. But she keeps me safe. And, you know. She loves me. Which is cool, I guess.”

Dad puts his arm around my shoulders. “Of course she does.”

“Well, how have you been?” I ask.

“Beloved daughter being kidnapped by a faerie aside? Fine.”

“Good. Good. How’s Grandma?”

“Doing well. Just about to publish a paper on the subtle sexism of children’s television. She’s been looking after your cousin Henry a lot lately and I think it started to get to her. Did you know that there’s still a 2:3 gender imbalance in shows for preschool children, and that 70% of the female characters are still coded with traditionally feminine colours?”

“Sounds likely.” I pause. “Why is she looking after Henry more? Aunt Imogen and Uncle Paul OK?”

“Ah, yes, you weren’t here.”

My heart stills, imagining all number of horrible things. “What?”

“Imogen’s pregnant again.”

It is this, more than anything else, that stuns me into silence. Imogen is in her mid-forties. She’d been wanting a sibling for Henry for some time, but thought it probably wasn’t going to happen. I’m overjoyed for her, but a little bit shocked by what I’ve missed.

What I’ll continue to miss.

“Oh,” I say. “Well. Congratulations.”

Something thuds to the floor upstairs. Dad stiffens, grabbing a ceremonial dagger off the coffee table. He puts his arm out in front of me.

I stare at the blade. “Do you even know how to use that?” I ask.

“Pointy end goes in first.”

“Ha, ha.”

The movement gets louder. “Stay behind me.”

I decide not to argue, but draw out my own weapon nonetheless. I creep up the stairs after him, putting my glamour back on in case the threat is benign. I wish once more that I was more like the others, my senses finely honed. But I can hear nothing behind my door.

Dad turns the knob, and crosses the threshold.

There's a whirl of something dark and he's flipped onto his back, the dagger seized from his grip. I launch at the shape, knocking it to the floor before it can right itself, not even looking at the face until I've twisted the weapon away.

Two large brown eyes blink up at me, a mask of pure shock.

"Libby," I breathe.

"Sephy."

I shift off her.

"You're OK."

"I'm—"

She tackles me into a fierce hug, and we both let out a choking sigh.

"I thought…" she starts again, drawing back to stare at me. "I had no idea what I thought."

Dad climbs to his feet, rubbing the back of his head. "Hell of a flip you got there, kid."

"Me?" Libby stares back at me. "She just tackled me to the floor! Where did you learn to do *that?"*

"Um—"

"Actually, you know what, don't answer that. Where have you *been?* And don't tell me that you've been at some fancy school, because I know that's bull." She glares over my shoulder at Dad.

"You've spoken to my Dad?"

"Yeah, so, like, a few weeks ago, I started to think it was just really strange how I hadn't heard from you in, you know, forever. But no one else seemed bothered, which was weird. And then I started having these *crazy* dreams about Halloween and I couldn't remember seeing you afterwards so I came over here but your dad said you were away at a school but he was totally cagey so… hello, Detective Libby Singh!"

Dad is still massaging his head. "You broke into our home!"

"Sephy was missing!

"What did you think had happened?"

"I don't know!" she holds up her hands. "I *still* don't know! What is going on?"

Something whirs and clicks in Dad's pocket.

He draws it out. It looks like a spinning top, only it's making an awful, horrible, screeching sound. He stares at it as if willing it to stop.

"What's—" I start.

"Did you bring anyone with you?" he snaps at me.

“No, I—”

“We need to get out of here.”

“Dad, what’s—”

He turns towards the door, but a shadow cuts through the window. I see it just in time, summoning my wings to shield Dad and Libby as my window explodes. Five winged creatures, all talons and feathers, burst into my room.

Harpies.

Libby is screaming, loud, unintelligible sounds. Dad seizes her arm and pushes her down the steps. I rip off my glamour and lash my whip against the ceiling, bringing down my faux chandelier and what feels like half of the roof.

Victorian houses. Easily crumbled.

I race down the stairs, slamming the door behind me and locking it with faerie magic, although I know it won’t hold long. I could, possibly, handle five harpies, but I’ve never fought that number on my own before, and I don’t trust myself not to set the whole building on fire. Dad was right. We need to get out.

“What on earth is going on and *holy hell you have wings.”* Libby stares at me in shock as Dad races round the room, stuffing things into his satchel. He disappears into his study for a moment.

“What’s with that outfit?” Libby stammers. “And your *face.* And those weapons—”

“Can you use a sword?” Dad emerges from his study, carrying weapons. I’d always thought they were purely decorative. He passes a robust one to Libby, buckling another dagger to his waist.

“Um, theoretically?” she replies, taking one from his grip.

“Good enough.”

My door bursts open, and the harpies come flying into the room. I snatch one out of the air and skewer it with my dagger. It collapses on the sofa, exploding one of the throw cushions in its death throes.

“What are you attacking?” Libby yells, swinging her sword at nothing. “Why are there feathers everywhere?”

At that moment, I realise two things.

One: Libby can’t see the harpies.

Two: Dad certainly can.

He seems to understand this too, and hands Libby a pair of goggles that look forged from rock.

“What are—” she starts.

A picture falls off the wall as I snatch another harpy out of the air. Libby shrieks in alarm. “Are we being haunted? Is this some crazy poltergeist sh—”

He forces the goggles onto her head.

“Holy shit!”

One of the harpies streams towards her. She slices it out of the air before I can reach it, watching the black blood gleaming against the silver of her sword. Another takes advantage of her shock and lunges for her, but I scrape it away and slice it nearly in two.

Libby swears, muttering every curse under the sun. Dad even looks up from finishing one I’ve already downed to look utterly appalled at the colourful words streaming from her mouth.

“Where the hell did you learn to do that?” she finishes.

“Hell.” The way to the door is clear. “Come on. We need to move.”

I just about remember to glamour away my wings as we hit the street below. I’ve no idea what the public can see, but at very least three people armed with swords racing towards the park. I can hear the low cry of the harpies scuttering across the rooftops, talons scraping against car roofs. Libby keeps stopping, glancing behind. For all that she’s been doing martial arts for years, she’s never been in a real fight.

We make it to the gates of the park. I’ve only got a half-formed plan of just getting to the circle, hoping to find allies on the other side. It occurs to me I’m not even sure how to take them across with me, only that it must be possible.

I only realise halfway there that I’m not the only one who knows about it, when Dione cuts across the path.

She’s dressed for battle in black and bronze, her raven hair braided back. One cool aquamarine eye blazes. The other…

The other is milky, discoloured, and scarred—from when I slashed her with her own dagger six weeks ago.

Despite how much I despise her, I’m not glad I did that.

“Persephone,” she calls, my name passing her lips like the gravest of insults.

She fires a crossbow at her hip. I leap out in front of Dad and Libby, flinging out my wings like a shield. A bolt seers against my feathers, and I let out a howl.

“Sephy!” shrieks Dad.

“I’m OK!” I hiss, and turn back towards Dione.

She's flanked by goblins, redcaps, and a couple of trolls. Behind us, the remainder of the harpies circle us. We're surrounded. Outnumbered. Even if I was here with Artemis and Apollo, I wouldn't fancy our odds.

Think, Sephy, think.

I can't panic. I can't give up. There's far, far too much at stake.

There's a flash of light, a crackle of lightning, and whirl of peacock feathers. Zera appears behind Dione, in a diaphanous dress of pale gold. A mighty crown is twisted into her hair, and Athena, her mighty general, stands at her side.

Dad stiffens beside me, drawing out his arms, as if he has any power to protect me from them.

As if this isn't exactly what Zera wants.

"Persephone," Zera calls, her voice dark and cold. "How wonderful to see you again."

I hate that those words aren't a lie, that she *is* pleased to see me. This is what she wanted. I've walked into a trap.

"Consent to open the Gate to Tartarus," she continues, "or watch one of your companions die."

I want to say *never.* I want to have some witty retort. But I can't say anything. I have everything to lose and nothing to gain. Attempting to carve even an iota of power is beyond foolish.

I swallow, waiting for my words to appear.

"Come now," Zera continues, "make your choice."

I don't have one. I don't have one and you know it.

I look between Dad and Libby, wondering who she'll choose first, if there's any way of stopping this, delaying it, preventing it. My eyes scan over the park, trying to force it into black-and-white tiles, to imagine every person as a piece on a chessboard, so I may better calculate my moves.

But all I see are three lone white pawns, surrounded by a sea of black, squirming under the shadow of a queen.

You're a queen too, says a voice that sounds like my mother's. But I don't feel it, not today.

Think, think, Sephy, think.

And I do think. I think of Hades falling into the Pit, and how I wish I'd fallen with him, and how much it will break me if something happens to Dad or Libby because of me.

A cloud of grey swamps the park, followed by several sparks, bursts of smoke.

Hazel appears in front of me, along with Emetria, Willa and Apollo.

"Run," says Emetria.

And I do. I grab Libby's hand in one, Dad's in my other, and bolt from our spot. We're half-blind, and I'm relying on my other, half-trained senses, and the line of hunters springing out of the smoke.

"This way!" I hear Peony call.

Libby coughs and splutters, but says nothing. She lets herself be led. Dad too, helpless as a child.

I can't believe I've brought them into this.

Dione launches into me, knocking me to my feet, and Dad and Libby wrenched from my grasp. I hear them screaming for me. Peony calls my name, but they're swallowed up by fog.

"Get them to safety!" I hiss at Peony. "That's an order!"

I'm still not used to giving orders, but I know I can. The hunters have sworn themselves to Artemis, and she has sworn herself to me. I was reluctant at first to accept anyone's oath, but I was told there's power in it; that Artemis can borrow a fraction of mine if she's sworn to me as her queen.

I think they were hoping to bolster my own power, but nothing happened.

Peony's voice disappears.

Dione claws at my face. My wings rise up to protect me, and she tears out handfuls of feathers. I lash out, kicking her backwards and scrambling to my feet. I summon my rapier, grabbing my whip. She snatches her own twin daggers.

"Careful with those," I sneer, "I hear they're sharp."

This angers her. She launches towards me, wild and furious, her aim off, her steps hasty. I side-step her easily and she plunges into the fog.

"I'll kill you!" she seethes.

"Go on then," I tell her, as if it won't make the slightest bit of difference. *I'm already dead anyway.*

When she launches another attack, I catch her round the middle with my whip, and toss her into a nearby troll. I stab her in the thigh, and don't wait for her to get up. I rush into the fog in what I hope is the right direction.

"Persephone…" calls a voice.

I freeze. It's so hard and low that for a moment, it doesn't even seem female. It's velvet-smooth.

It's *his* voice.

Then a laugh, hard, cold, and cruel. I realise it was no accident, that she *made* her voice sound like that.

"Neat trick," I say, hoping I don't sound as shaky as I feel. "What are you? A peacock or parrot?"

"I'm everything," she hisses back. "And you… you are nothing. You *have* nothing."

"Everything, huh?" I try to ignore the fear at her last words. "Then why haven't you gotten rid of this fog?"

For a moment, she is silent. She is High Queen of the Seelie Court. Her power, while not absolute, should be enough to disperse this fog summoned by one of her own subjects.

I'm starting to understand why Mother was adamant I style myself as Queen rather than Lady, why she swore herself to me even though she was the leader. I'm starting to understand what it means to have power.

"I didn't think so."

I run forward into the mist.

"I'll kill you," she repeats, her voice harder. "I will suck your power from your corpse. I will open the way to Tartarus, and I will wipe humanity off the face of the earth."

"Good luck with that," I tell her, no longer afraid, or no longer controlled by it, not right now. Because no matter how terrified I am of her, I hate her more.

I bolt into the mist, trying to trust less in my eyes and more on my instincts, to *feel* where I need to go.

"Athena," comes Emetria's voice, "You don't need to do this."

"Yes, I do."

I spy them ahead of me, Athena and my mother, launching attack after attack, a blaze of silver and purple.

Emetria strains beneath the force of Athena's shield.

"We have to take the world back," Athena insists, her face contorted. "Humans have a shocking capacity to commit atrocities beyond all reckoning."

"And we don't?"

"They squander almost every opportunity to learn, going backwards as often as they go forwards—"

"At least they change."

Athena says nothing to this, like Emetria has uttered the gravest of insults. I take advantage of her distraction and wrap my whip around her

ankle, yanking her away from Emetria.

"No, Sephy!" she calls, Athena still downed. "Keep running!"

I do. The grove where the circle sits blossoms into view. Dad and Libby are waiting there, hunters cutting down anyone that comes near.

"Mother," I say, stopping shortly in front of them. "She's coming."

"Mother?" Libby gapes.

Emetria appears before I can explain, bruised and breathless. She grabs my hand, flings me into the middle of the circle, and seizes Libby and Dad's hands. We whirl away to nothingness.

Libby lies on the floor of the cavern, spluttering and occasionally mumbling things. Dad stares at my mother.

"Emetria," he says coolly.

She inclines her head. "Phillip."

"Mind telling me what on Earth just happened?"

"Not right now. I have to get back—"

"No," he says, his voice dark, "now."

She sighs. "I knew there was a chance Zera was watching the circle in Hyde Park, waiting for Persephone to return to London. To find you. To use you to get to her."

"You used him as *bait?*" I say, suddenly appalled. "And me?"

"I wanted to be wrong."

"That's not good enough!" Dad snaps, harder than I have ever heard him. He barely even sounds like Dad any more, every soft edge filed to a point.

"You should have told me," I tell her, not as darkly. "I would have been more prepared."

"And yet, you are fine, and we have lured Zera herself into battle." She turns towards the circle, stepping back inside it. "If I was wrong, you would have had a day in the sun," she tells me, back facing me. "I didn't want to take that from you."

She disappears in a cloud of gold.

Dad is still seething, muttering furious words under his breath, but as she vanishes, I realise something else, too. Another reason she has to return.

Because if she kills Zera, this all ends today. Her forces will collapse. We can search Tartarus freely, not having to worry about her following us.

We can get Hades back.

I should be annoyed she used Dad as bait. Furious, even. But I realise in that moment that she wants Hades back almost as much as I do, is willing to do questionable things to make that happen, and I can't be mad about that.

I can be scared. I remember what Hades said about her, that she was a schemer capable of using people. I'd never noticed it before because she's never used *me*, because I was within her sphere of protection.

For the most part, anyway.

I wonder if that's the only reason she didn't tell me her plans. I'm not the most skilled in espionage. Maybe she couldn't trust me to look innocent.

I have so many other things to be angry about, I'm not sure I have the energy for this.

"My Queen?"

I turn. Hippolyta is guarding the mouth of the tunnel, blue-black hair gleaming in the faint greenish light.

"A vessel has been readied to take you and your companions back to the palace. Will you require an escort?"

I shake my head, ignoring Libby as she mouths, 'queen?' and 'palace?' under her breath. "I'm sure we'll be fine. Hell seems pretty empty today."

I tell Libby and Dad the entire story as we drift down the Styx, rowed by a blue-skinned pixie by the name of Twylla. Libby occasionally tears her eyes away from my tale to stare at her, but otherwise her eyes remain on me as I recount every detail of the past few months, from the moment Hades took me.

The one thing I don't tell them is exactly what happened between us and what he is to me, but it must shimmer behind every word. I can't hide it. I'm just not sure what will happen if I speak it. I don't want any tears. Despite what they've seen today—or perhaps, because of it—they need to know that I'm fine, not a piece of glass in a fire, threatening to shatter.

I have never seen Libby so quiet. Afterwards, her gaze falls to the river, as if searching for the words to speak.

Or maybe she's too horrified to think.

Dad isn't much louder. For a long time, it's just the quiet wail, the dip of the oars, and the sound of him rustling in his satchel with the few belongings he managed to stuff in there during the scuffle.

"What's with the spinning top?" I ask him, as he slips it into a pocket.

"A sensor," he says. "Bought it off a faerie black market."

I'm almost as overwhelmed with the idea that Dad knows all about this stuff as he must be with everything I've just told him. I don't think it would be fair to be mad, no matter how much I wish he'd told me about this half of my life.

He must have been hoping against hope that he'd never have to tell me.

Like Emetria was hoping I could just have one day in the sun.

Maybe they're not so different after all, or maybe it's just a parent thing I don't understand, because I don't have children and I've only ever had one parent before.

"It goes off around faeries?"

"Unseelie ones," he says. "Can be a bit funny around pixies and nymphs, sometimes, like it can't decide." He glances up at our putter, and the sensor lets off a low whir, as if on command. "Sorry," he adds.

"No matter," says Twylla, diligently continuing to row.

Libby turns back towards us. "Um, Unseelie?"

"The ugly ones," my father explains, in a manner disturbingly familiar to when Hades told me that the Seelie court was composed of, 'the pretty ones'.

At this, Twylla does bristle.

"Um, generally speaking," he clarifies. "Goblins, redcaps, trolls, ogres… the harpies you saw today. There are a few types that belong to both courts. Fauns, nymphs and pixies among them."

Libby blinks. "So the sensor only goes off for the ugly type of faeries?"

"Yes, more or less."

"I think that sounds slightly racist, Professor."

"I think that just saved our lives, Libby."

Libby groans, rubbing her temples, her fingers catching on the huge goggles still strapped to her head. They look heavy and uncomfortable, but she seems reluctant to remove them.

I turn to Dad. "How come you can see through most glamours and Libby needs those goggles?"

"True sight," he explains. "Your mother gifted it to me. But I already had the goggles by that point."

"How do you get it?" I ask.

"There's a few ways. Looking through a natural hole in a stone is one…" he says, gesturing to Libby's goggles. "But that's temporary. The most dependable way is faerie spit."

I cringe. "Mother… spat in your eyes?"

“Hardly any worse than the other stuff we did when—”

“Please stop.”

Libby, hearing all this, takes off her goggles and looks around. “Weird.”

“What do you see?”

“No people in the water, for one. Everything else is just… fuzzier. Darker. Like regular freaking caves.”

I’d always been able to see them. I never thought to question it. Neither had Hades, either because he knew what I was or because he’d simply forgotten what mortals could and couldn’t see. It was likely the latter, seeing as he was constantly trying to help me unravel the truth.

Libby gives the goggles back to my father and holds out her hand to me. I stare at it blankly.

“Do you want to hold hands?”

“Spit in my hands, idiot.”

“What?”

“This true sight malarky. I want it. Come on, it’s only fair.”

“Are you sure, Libby?” Dad warns. “Once you’ve got it, there’s no going back. You’ll see things that other mortals can’t explain—”

“Yeah, no, we’re past that. Nothing is ever going to be the same again, and I want to be able to protect myself. True sight, please.”

The thought of her rubbing my spit on her eyes makes me cringe.

“Don’t be a wuss,” she tells me, reading my expression. “It’s no worse than kissing. I guess you could lick my eyeballs instead, if you prefer—”

“Hard pass,” I say. I spit directly into her palm and don’t watch as she scrubs her eyes with it, although I catch her blinking rapidly in my peripheral vision.

“Whoa,” she says. “This is eye-opening, if you pardon the pun.”

She perks up after that, whilst my mind wanders.

I think of strange things, like the ruin of my former home, of the plaster and claw marks. Of me destroying my room without a thought for the chaos, tearing down the same ceiling that I’d carefully stenciled three years beforehand.

It can be repaired, but not like it was before. That room will carry more scars than my skin.

Former home.

It no longer feels like home to me. Nothing does.

And I wonder, if we don’t get Hades back, even if I live five hundred years, if anything will ever feel like home to me again.

Finally, we reach the bank outside of the palace. Libby gawks at the doors. I can see Dad mentally scanning the engravings like an archaeologist might brush through bones, taking careful note, awed by the discovery opening up around him.

Two of the hunters swing open the doors. I've granted many of them access, so they're capable of taking refuge should Zera ever make it this far down. We may be sitting ducks, but Zera will never be able to breach the Obsidian halls, and I can rescind access with a flick of my wrists.

The long corridor is empty, although there's some movement in the throne room. Most of our forces are no doubt still in the park, on patrol, or holding the circle.

Maybe I shouldn't have left them.

I shake my head. I had to get Dad and Libby to safety. I owed it to them, and I don't think either would have left without me.

Irma comes forward to greet us. She's a formidable enough force on the battlefield, but she rarely leaves the palace. She's more familiar with it than anyone else, and has become something between guard and housekeeper. She manages everything.

"Mortal guests?" she says, an eyebrow raised.

Libby stares at her flame-red wings, fluttering behind her.

"My father and my friend," I explain. "Phillip Carter and Libby Singh."

She gives them something like a half-hearted bow. "Your mother?"

"Fighting Zera's forces in Hyde Park."

"Never a dull moment." She glances over my outfit. "You should change," she says. "I'll find something for your father, set him up somewhere. Can you find something for your friend?"

For the first time, I notice the dust and dirt on Libby's clothes, the flecks of harpy blood. "Sure."

I guide her into my bedroom. There's a low growl as we enter, and Fluffy, Hurricane and Kerby, rush forward to greet me.

Libby scuttles backwards.

"You have a three-headed dog."

"Actually," I say, tackling their slobbery kisses, "I have three dogs with one body, but it's an easy mistake to make." I bat away their mouths and rub their heads. "Kerby, Fluffy and Hurricane. Watch out for Fluffy. He's a little bit grumpier than the others."

"Fluffy? Who calls a dog-head like that Fluffy?"

At this, I prickle. "Hades," I say quietly. "They're Hades' dogs. Ours."

Before she can probe, there's a hiss from the corner, and Pandora demands the same attention I've given the dogs. Libby prickles, as if the cat is more formidable than the baby cerberus.

"When did *she* get down here? Did you come back for your cat and not for us? Because if so, rude."

"Hades brought her here for me at the start."

"The Lord of the Underworld brought you your cat?"

"That is correct."

"Hmm. I like that."

I head to the bathroom to strip off my armour, dumping it in the laundry basket for the palace magic to clean and re-sort. I splash my face, scrubbing the blood from my fingers, before offering the room to Libby. Her eyes run over every surface.

"Bit dark for your tastes, isn't it?"

I suddenly remember that mortal eyes aren't as finely-tuned as fae ones, and although my eyesight seems to have settled somewhere between the two, it's probably still too dark for Libby. I click my fingers, summoning more light, peeling back the red velvet drapes and mahogany furniture.

Libby says nothing, but she must know this is not my room, and must be wondering why I don't brighten it up in other ways if I can do so by magic.

I drift into the closet and pull on the first dress my fingers fall to. It's dark reds, browns, burnt oranges, autumn given shape. The collar and neckline are composed of leaves, drifting across the rest of the gown as though caught in a breeze.

"Damn," Libby says, "that's gorgeous."

"Help yourself."

She comes out of the closet with her arms laden with clothes, tossing them down on the bed. Gowns of silk that hug every curve, ruffled shirts, velvet doublets, suede boots. Her eyes gleam almost hungrily, and I sense she could spend hours trying on clothes here.

"Libby," I say quietly, before I lose my nerve, "I'm really sorry I got you involved with all of this."

She holds up a dress of green silk, the colour of forests. "Do I look like I'm not enjoying myself?"

I laugh at this. The clothes were one of the first things I enjoyed, too.

There's a knock on the door as Libby is dressing.

“Your mother is back,” Irma announces. “She wants you in the war room.”

“I’ll be right back.” I tell Libby.

“Will the dog eat me?”

“No.”

“What about the cat?”

I snort. “No.”

“Then take your time.”

I hurry along to the war room. Artemis is there, along with Apollo. They’re disheveled, but unhurt. Noises permeate the corridor, and I sense the majority of our forces have returned.

“I take it from the lack of trumpets that Zera is still alive?” I ask.

Emetria nods. “But our forces are intact. And we won a circle today. It is a victory.” She sounds like she is trying to convince herself more than us, but she can say it, so she must believe it’s true on some level.

“We have many options open to us now, if we can hold it,” says Artemis.

“We *will* hold it,” adds Apollo, and it’s clear this is supposed to be a compliment directed at his sister’s hunters.

“What’s our next move, then?” I ask the table.

All eyes shift to Emetria. “There’s a few options, and it’s best we evaluate all, and quickly, too. Tomorrow I shall be seeking out an oracle to guide us. Once she’s imparted her wisdom, we’ll be in a better position to act.”

“It’s a good call,” says Artemis.

Emetria turns to Irma. “Could you bring in our guests?”

“Guests?” queries Artemis, as Irma vanishes.

By the time we’ve explained, Libby and Dad have arrived, both now clean. Artemis takes them in, eyes soaking up every detail.

“A scholar,” she announces, looking at my father. “And a...”

Libby’s eyes go wide.

“This is Artemis,” I tell her, “Lady of the Hunt.”

“Artemis,” Libby whispers, almost too low to hear. She bristles, stiffening upright. “Hi, I’m Elizabeth. Elizabeth Singh. But you can just call me Libby. Or Elizabeth. It’s cool. Whatever.”

Artemis raises an eyebrow. “You are a warrior?”

“I um, well, I work out, and I guess I’m pretty good at self-defence—”

Artemis throws Libby a staff. She catches it perfectly. The slightest smile brushes Artemis' cheeks.

"A warrior," she confirms, giving a tiny nod of her head. "You are welcome to train with us at any time." She breezes past us. "I must speak with my hunters. A pleasure to meet you, Elizabeth Singh."

Artemis leaves the room. My father moves from Emetria to introduce himself to Apollo. Libby sinks against me. "I just made a total fool of myself in front of freaking Artemis, didn't I?"

"You have been smoother."

"She's a goddess, Sephy."

"Technically," I explain, "she's just a—"

Libby shakes her head, not having it. "No, she's a goddess. I am a mere mortal—"

"Now, that is accurate."

"She said I could train with her."

"And her hunters."

"I think I'm in love."

I sigh, but I'm used to Libby's sudden one-sided crushes on people. Usually girls. Occasionally boys. And now, apparently, faerie demi-goddesses.

I give it a week.

Emetria comes back over to us, clutching a piece of paper with a few names and addresses on. I recognise Gran's name, and Aunt Imogen's. She sees the panic spark across my face.

"Zera might try to get to you through another means, if she doesn't have your father," she explains. "I'm going to find them, and glamour them, and hide them. They will be safe, Sephy, I promise you."

A coldness still grips my veins, but I manage to push it aside. She turns to Libby instead.

"I can do the same for you, if you like."

"What, hide me away? No thanks. I'm staying here."

"If you do not come with me now, I'm not sure when you'll get another chance—"

"The Professor isn't going."

Emetria blinks at her. "He's her father."

"And I'm her best friend!" says Libby, as if this title holds equal weight. "I'm here for the long haul. But, if you could maybe glamour my family into not freaking out, that'd be great."

“Of course.” She hands her the paper, and Libby scribbles down the address. Emetria and Apollo dart off without another word.

Shortly after, Irma arrives with a tray of blackberry wine, blue-veined cheese, tiny bread rolls and slices of fruit cut into the shape of roses. Libby tears into it while Dad and I pick at the pieces, not saying very much.

“This wine is *amazing,*” Libby drawls. “And no one asked if I was old enough to drink it!”

A thought crashes against me. “I missed your birthday.”

Libby looks at me incredulously. “That’s OK, Seph. You were trapped in the Underworld.”

“It was your eighteenth.”

“I can count.”

“I’m sorry—”

“Don’t be sorry,” she says. “But if you want to refill this wine for me…”

I smile, snapping my fingers to summon the bottle. Libby’s eyes widen.

“A complete list of your powers,” she demands. “Now.”

It’s actually nice to talk about what I can do with someone who isn’t disappointed by what I *can’t.* Libby doesn’t know what I should be able to do. She’s amazed by glamour alone, by the layers of it, the ones that compel mortals and the cosmetic ones we use on ourselves. I take her on a tour of the gardens once she’s done eating, and she is mesmerised by everything, gazing at it with the same joy I once did.

I don’t come in here very much now, but someone—Peony, probably, maybe Emetria—has been tending to my little garden, my scattered pink rose bushes and potted herbs. My slice of home when I had none.

“This place is amazing,” Libby breathes.

It was, once.

I pluck some blooms, for her sake or mine, I’m not sure, and take them back to my room. Irma has laid out supper for anyone returning from patrol in the kitchen. The rota has been amended, half our forces directed at holding the circle. Our numbers are slim.

I make a note to make sure to animate the new skeleton warriors tomorrow. Every little helps.

I give Libby the same ‘welcome to Faerieland’ talk Hades once gave me, telling her how to ward off enchantments, spot lies, and to be careful what she eats and drinks. I doubt any of the hunters here will wish her ill, but it is better safe than sorry.

Dad is installed with a bed in the library and spends the evening reading. It doubtless brings him some comfort, some sense of normality in this utterly unfamiliar environment. Libby and I retire to my room, donning matching silk nightgowns; hers crimson, mine white. I haven’t worn much white of late, but I make an exception for sleepwear.

Libby snuggles down under the covers, and for a moment I forget about how I’m going to end up with her elbows in my eye sockets or her knee in my back. I forget how strange it will be to share a bed with someone other than him. The gowns, silk and velvet melt away. The harshness of the room blurs. Months are rolled away. We’re just two best friends, having a sleepover.

She tells me what everyone’s been up to, how Jackson finally asked Eva out, how a group of friends won Battle of the Bands, and that our history teacher, Mrs Clare, had her baby and named him, “some daft thing I can’t remember but is probably historical. I guess when you teach, all other names have been ruined for you.” Weeks are sandwiched into an hour.

Everything and nothing has happened. I feel a strange sense all at once; mourning what I’ve missed at the same time as noting how irrelevant everything seems. I wonder if all faeries look at the lives of mortals this way, as if their accomplishments are unimportant.

Our accomplishments. I’m still half-mortal.

Finally, Libby runs out of things to say. She stares at me, waiting for me to talk instead.

“So, tell me more about this Hades guy. I’m only dimly remembering him from that crazy night and when he came to you know, glamour me. He was a jerk the first time and a lot nicer the second. But also terrifying. Very conflicting images. Although he’s an alluring piece of tunic, I’ll give you that.”

For the first time in the longest while, I laugh. “‘An alluring piece of tunic’?”

“I’d go straight for that.”

“You are a little straight.”

“I’d go straighter.”

I've missed this. I've missed Libby and laughter and talking about him, especially talking about him like he's still here.

Because he's coming back.

"Come on." She nudges me. "I need all the courtship details. I need to know how he swept Sephy Carter off her feet. Did he do it literally? Please tell me he did it literally."

So I tell her. I tell her everything that's mine to tell, from his outrageous flirting to his paper flowers. I tell her every word and detail that doesn't feel like an invasion of his privacy, and she listens patiently through it all, gasping and sighing at the appropriate moments.

"Damn, girl," she says when I'm done. "I'm falling a little bit in love with him. Does he have a sister?"

"He has a psychotic brother."

"Hmm. How psychotic are we talking?"

"Libby..."

"I'm kidding. I think. Mostly." She squeezes my arm. "Seph?"

"Yeah?"

"We're going to get him back."

I didn't realise how much I needed to hear those words. No one has been able to utter them. There have been words of trying, but no promises, no absolutes. No one can guarantee it.

"Thanks," I tell her, not managing much more.

She holds out her small finger, linking her pinky in mine, and that tiny promise, silly and frivolous and mortal though it is, means more to me than all the intransmutable words of Faerie.

I rarely sleep easily, anymore. Drifting off isn't too hard. I'm usually so exhausted by the time I make it into bed that nothing can stop me from melting into the darkness. I squeeze the dogs or Pandora and fall away from it all.

But it's the nightmares that plague me, and waking from them, too rested to sleep again, with little to do until the rest of the palace starts to stir.

Tonight I dream I'm lying on the floor of my old room next to Luliver. He's so young. *I'm* so young. *Peter Pan* is pressed against my chest. We're bunched up under blankets, and I curl against him, listening to the beat of his heart.

And then it goes silent.

I open my eyes, and I'm hugging a corpse. His body has gone frozen and cold, his eyes milk-white, and he is less alive than the bones I'm to animate.

You're too late.

I splutter out of sleep, tumbling from my bed. Libby murmurs something, but doesn't rouse. My heart is speeding in my chest, and I'm choking on air.

A dream. Just a dream. But one that dared to twist one of my old, new memories of him.

Don't take that memory from me, I beg whatever forces might be listening. *Don't take any more of him from me. Don't twist what I have left.*

I hug the mark of Hades on my arm, tracing the frayed edge where black meets silver. He is not dead.

Usually, when I wake, I pace about the room for a while, summon myself a glass of wine, shower. I've not had much of a mind for creative tasks, not until recently. Sometimes I'd go to train when no one was there to judge, but the armoury is rarely empty, even at night.

I don't want to wake Libby. I tip-toe out of the room and into the kitchen, intent on making myself a cup of calming tea. Faerie is full of all

kinds, and there's a plain herbal one that's helped in the past. I fiddle with the petal-leaf cups.

"I'd be inclined to take something stronger," says a voice beside the hearth, "but I suppose I ought to be teaching you better habits."

Emetria sits in the low glow of the fire, beside a half-finished bottle of Hades' finest pomegranate wine—the same wine he used to extract the 'bargain' from me that saved my life. I'd found the orchard a while back; they were no normal pomegranates. Great large things with a golden skin, their seeds as sweet as nectar.

She sees me eyeing the bottle and summons another goblet. Most of the High Court can't summon outside of their home realms, other than their weapons. Someone must have granted her access. Hades, maybe, back when they still got on? I had barely mastered the skill myself.

She pours me a glass.

"I'm not eighteen until next month."

"Legal to drink in your own home just about anywhere," she says, and I take the glass. It does not feel like I am home. "People are a lot more relaxed in Greece, anyway."

I wonder why she's talking about Greece, but my eyes wander to a small silver mirror on her lap. There are all sorts of enchanted mirrors in Faerie; ones that can show you mortal plains, television shows, secret spots from around the world. Ones that can be used to spy on your enemies, although pocket realms like this are exempt.

Emetria's mirror displays the moving image of a villa amidst a field of wheat. Everything is white and orange, or natural gold, everything except the azure skies and the glittering blue sky.

"Is that Greece?" I ask.

She nods. "Crete, to be precise. It's my home. I have several residences to my name, of course, dotted all over the globe. But this one is home to me." She stares a while longer at the flickering image. "You were born there," she says quietly. "I should like to take you there, one day. When… when things are better."

Tiny, false memories rise up inside me. I imagine growing up there, instead of London, the utter impossible lunacy of my life, of living with magic. Raised beside it.

I wonder if I had a room there. I wonder what she's done with it now.

"I should like to go," I tell her eventually. "When things are better."

She smiles at this. “I took Luliver there a few times,” she says softly. “He loved it.”

I imagine knowing him properly, all of my life, not having had my memories snatched away. I suppose I could ask for them back, the memory of our first few meetings, but it feels too much for today, and I don’t want them corrupted by my dreams.

She studies the image again, taking another long sip of wine. “I could have ended it today. If I’d been smarter or stronger or braver—”

I bristle, not because I agree, but because she sounds like me.

“You’re all of those things,” I tell her.

She blinks at me, and shrugs it off. Of course, she thinks that I am lying. “I am never enough of any of those things.”

“You’re centuries old!”

“Age can help with wisdom,” she says sagely. “But not always. Age can far too often be a prison. It’s hard to think new, to think fresh.” Her eyes gloss over. “I did not think, when it came to it, that Athena would ally with Zera. She has always been the wisest of us. Always adaptable. Always brave.”

“You’re friends?”

“For some six centuries now.”

That’s an impossible amount of time to be friends with someone, a ludicrous amount. I can’t fathom what that must be like, what they must have seen together, endured.

“I’ve been to university with her twelve times.”

Twelve times? Assuming each course lasted around three years, that’s over thirty years they’ve spent together alone.

I think about how much Libby means to me in the under seven years we’ve had together. I can’t imagine multiplying it.

And I certainly can’t imagine facing her off on opposite sides of a war.

No wonder Emetria hasn’t spoken of this friendship before.

“Why do you think she’s backing Zera?”

“No idea. That’s why I’m worried. I’m worried I’ve missed something. Some other motive. Something more than power.” She sighs, swigging her goblet. “Ask me something nice, if you can. I need the distraction.”

I could ask her about Crete. I could ask her about our brief time there. I could ask her about history, her life, where she’s been. I could ask her what my other grandparents were like, whether we’re actually descended from the original Demeter and Persephone and how much of their story was true.

I do not. I'm still caught up in her plans and schemes, her desires. Her future, not her past.

"When we overthrow Zera, what do you plan to do next?"

Emetria laughs. "I honestly haven't worked that part out yet." She stares at me, my gaze unwavering. "You think I want to install myself as queen."

"Someone must rule. It seems unlikely that you haven't thought that far ahead."

"For almost eighteen years, I have plotted against her. Every move I've made has been about removing her from power. I haven't thought about who to put in her place."

There are limited candidates, but I don't think long on that. "Eighteen years?"

"I… I was angry, at the world, I think, after I gave you up. That anger found other places to nest. I noticed things about Zera I hadn't noticed before, a cruelty in her, a malice, and…"

"What?"

"I… I didn't know the depths of what she was doing to Luliver, but I saw how indifferently she treated him. How could I not hate someone who didn't treasure their child when I so longed for my own?" She pauses. "I couldn't raise you. I raised something else instead. An army in place of my lost child."

I see so many sides to her in this confession. An anger and bitterness I've never seen before, the schemer I've only glimpsed. And another thing, too. A desperation beyond measurement, that despite all her plots and machinations, she truly has never looked beyond usurping her queen.

She's never dreamed of actually winning.

"And what about you, Persephone? What will you do when this is all over?"

The question slaps at my mind, sounding something like nonsense. I haven't thought much beyond the obvious and surviving to the next day in a very long time.

"You mean after we rescue Luliver and defeat Zera?"

She nods.

"I don't know. Whatever he wants to do, I guess."

She pauses for a moment at this. "I don't think anyone's ever asked him that before," she says after a long while. I don't know what's going through

her mind, the precise guilts and schemes that whirl there. “Least of all me.” Another moment ticks by. “You should have something for yourself.”

“I’ll have him.”

“Sephy, much as I totally understand the appeal, do I really need to have the whole, ‘don’t pin all your dreams on a boy’ speech?"

I almost laugh.

“You should have dreams for yourself,” she insists. “And you should not be afraid of dreaming them.”

But I am afraid. I’m afraid of even contemplating a future without him, and I’m terrified of imagining one with him in it. The death of the dream will bury me like an avalanche, and all the power of Faerie would never dig me out again.

I take my wine back to bed, and manage to sleep again, at least for a short while. Libby’s still dead to the world when I wake for the final time. The dawn patrol is stirring. I make myself useful and animate the skeletons from yesterday’s haul, trying not to smell the flesh still clinging to the bones. Afterwards I go to the gardens and collect fresh herbs, making healing potions instead of breakfast.

There’s no trace of the two scuffles yesterday anywhere on my skin, but my head aches, from the wine or sleeplessness, I’m not sure.

Emetria has already set off on her quest for the Oracle. Apollo is out on patrol. I find dad in the library, poring over books.

“What are you even doing?” I ask him.

“You have your skills, Seph, I have mine. I’m researching.”

“Researching what, exactly?”

“I’m not entirely sure, yet,” he replies cryptically. “But seldom is knowledge useless. I’ll find something, I’m sure.”

Libby joins us shortly afterwards, wearing thigh-high velvet boots stitched with constellations and a dark tunic slashed at the slides for easy movement. She’s twisted part of her raven hair into something that resembles horns or ears, I’m not really sure. It’s threaded with gold.

She looks fierce and elegant and beautiful all at once, like a great faerie lady.

Like someone who belongs here.

"I want to kick some faerie butt," she announces, "and I wanted to know if you would volunteer your own butt for kicking?"

Despite myself, I smile. Libby has bested me in every single sparring match she's ever had with me, but that was before I transitioned into this half-fae creature.

She doesn't stand a chance.

Most, if not all of the other hunters have bested me. But I don't know them like I know Libby. And she suspects she *does* know what I can do. I doubt she was paying much attention as we ran for our lives yesterday.

"Sure," I say.

We head to the armoury and equip ourselves with staffs. Libby flicks hers from hand to hand, getting a sense of its weight and looking impressive while doing so. I twirl it under my arm, trying to keep my face impassive.

"Nice," says Libby, and takes the first lunge.

I side step her easily, and she re-adjusts her feet. She wasn't expecting me to be so fast. I never was before. I connect my staff with her second attack, pushing her back, just a little. Not giving her my full strength.

She grins. "Been a long time since I had a challenge," she says, "never thought I'd find one in you."

"Thanks, Libs."

"You're welcome."

She smacks my thigh, the jolt reaching me as if I'm wearing layers of padding. I know there's strength behind her blow, but it hardly registers.

She strikes again, trying to catch me round the back of the knees, but I dart away, feeling feather light. I press back, forcing her to skitter across the floor, in a move so acrobatic that a few of the hunters gasp approvingly.

I'm faster and stronger, but I don't think I look elegant.

We keep trading blows. Sweat beads Libby's brow. Her dark eyes are electric, as if everything about this excites her.

I'm excited, too. I'm painfully aware that I could beat her at almost any moment, if I wanted to.

But I don't. I'm enjoying myself.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Artemis click her fingers. Two of her hunters spring forward—Peony and a nymph whose name escapes me.

I understand the task, and a part of me is pleased that Artemis has given me extra opponents, sees that I'm capable of them.

"Sorry," I say to Libby.

“What for?”

I jab her in the stomach. Enough to wind, not injure. She crumples to the floor, wheezing.

Three opponents is a circle. Two is a line. The trick is not to let them both get either side of me.

Which they are currently.

Peony makes the first move, but I grab her staff in my free fist and tug it from her grasp, sweeping her feet out from under her and backing up so that they are both in my line of sight. She’s up again in seconds. I toss her weapon over to her.

I don’t want this over, not yet.

The nymph goes for my middle. I block her first blow, and her second, twisting round her and jabbing her in the back. Peony comes for me next, lunging for my thigh. I turn, half in air. There’s a swish of my skirts.

I earn an “ooh” from the crowd.

Something behind me shivers. I leap with a split second to spare. Hippolyta has joined the fray. The best of Artemis’ hunters.

I won’t beat her, but rather than be angry, or annoyed, I feel honoured.

She even smiles when I miss her blow.

We trade attacks. Wood clacks together. Peony manages a good strike to my back, but I roll out of the way of a second lunge and parry two swipes with the staff. I kick Hippolyta back.

I kicked Hippolyta back!

She startles, surprised at my strength, and her counter-attack sends me spiralling to the floor. I right myself before another blow comes, and everything gets faster, stronger, heavier.

The three trade looks. They have fought together for decades. I am outnumbered and outmatched and outsmarted.

But I’m not done yet.

I stop thinking like a warrior, just for a minute. I try to think like a scholar, a strategist. They are better than me. I can’t win through strength or speed. I need something they’re *not* used to.

I think, narrowing my thoughts, trying not to lose too much ground or too much energy as they advance.

They’re all old. But none of them have wings.

They’ve never fought a Hades before.

It’s hard not to let my wings unfurl at that singular thought, tempting not to see if I can cover myself in flames and unleash my power. But I need

the element of surprise. I need to be smart, still. I need to trust that they'll all underestimate me.

I've given them enough reason to.

I give them some more. I make a few clumsy blows. I look tired. I let them force me back.

And when I'm certain that they think the fight is over, I fling out my wings and charge into all three at once, throwing them back with the sheer force of them.

And then I light my wings on fire. Just because I can.

They concede defeat.

They could probably still have taken me, but it's a good finish. Artemis smiles.

"You fought well."

"Some of your training is sinking in."

"I never taught you that. You fought well yesterday, too, or so I hear."

"I had something to protect, then. I didn't… I didn't have a choice."

She nods her head, as if she understands this.

Libby races over towards me, grinning from ear to ear. She seems to have forgiven me for knocking her out of the fight. "Damn, girl!" she exclaims. "You're a badass! Am I attracted to my best friend right now? Is that a thing that's happening?"

"You fought well too," says Artemis.

"Me? I barely fought at all!"

"You're unused to fighting for your life," Artemis says. "You were not really trying to wound her."

"Well… yeah."

"I would see you unleashed."

Before Libby can ask precisely what this means, Diana bolts across the room and flings herself into Artemis' arms with a delighted, "Mama!"

"Mama?" Libby frowns. "You have a child?"

"I do," replies Artemis, as if this is not news.

"You don't look old enough."

"I'm a hundred and seventy."

"A hundred and—?" Libby blinks. "Yes, of course. Normal. Don't know why I'm surprised." She rocks back on her feet, waiting for Artemis to say something else, or find something to fill the silence. "So, what's her name?"

"Diana."

“Diana? Cool. After the Roman version of Artemis?” Libby tries not to look too pleased that she’s remembered this.

“No,” says Artemis shortly. “After Wonder Woman.”

Libby stares at her, disbelieving, before remembering that faeries can’t lie. She bursts out laughing. “You’re serious?”

“We can’t be anything but,” she says, although her smile is wry.

Artemis is *smiling.*

“You, goddess of the hunt, named your daughter after a superhero?”

“I am not a goddess,” says Artemis sagely. “And yes.”

“But why?”

“I’ve been reading Wonder Woman comics since they first came out. You know how long I waited for that film? A lot longer than you, mortal.”

Libby makes a sound between a squeak and a moan, and I know Artemis has suddenly become a lot more attractive to her, even if her having a child is a bit of a surprise.

Artemis deposits Diana on the floor and gently nudges her towards the others.

“I must organise the patrol,” she tells us. “I should like to add you to it, in a few days.”

“I’m not sure that’s—” I start.

“Um, yes!” Libby says, barely reining back her enthusiasm.

“I’ll keep her on the back lines, to begin with,” Artemis assures me. “And have my forces capture her something to practise on in the meantime.”

I recall my first kill, the utter terror of it, the avalanche of shame and horror. I don’t want to force Libby to do anything like it.

But she is not me.

“You’re enjoying yourself,” I tell her, as she watches Artemis sweeping out of the room, blue skirts billowing out from beneath her armour. “Too much,” I add.

“Actually,” Libby says, her eyes drifting around the rest of the room, across the rainbow of weapons and sparring partners, “I am enjoying it exactly the right amount.”

Our victory in securing the circle is quickly followed by another; we manage to expunge Zera’s forces from the gate. The battle is over before I

can even attend, and there is nothing for me to do but work on reanimating the pile of corpses left behind.

Libby watches me work, both horrified and amazed.

"Gotta say," she remarks. "Necromancy? Not the superpower I would have pegged you for."

"Me neither," I admit, and I make the skeletons dance, just for a moment of fun, a flash of the old me.

The next three days are a blur of training, patrols, war meetings I understand a little more than before, and trying not to worry over Emetria, who's still gone.

Zera has not tried to take back the circle. Either she's regrouping, or she has another target in mind.

I don't like waiting.

I'm amazed by my father's capacity to disappear into books the way others disappear into battle. It's like he's dived into a labyrinth. When I was a kid, it used to annoy me, how hard it could be to claw his attention back from between the pages of an ancient tome. Now, I'm just impressed.

I suppose it's also a good way of dealing with being thrown into this chaos.

We haven't talked much.

Emetria and Apollo return on the third day. Peony is sent to fetch me.

"Are they all right?"

She nods. "Your mother wants you to speak to the Oracle immediately. And she says to dress like a queen."

Libby looks up from the seat where she's polishing a sword, her eyes gleaming. "Yes! Makeover!"

"It's all right," I tell her. "I have something in mind."

During the first few days and weeks of my reign, I was forced to hold court, to let newcomers pledge their allegiance to me. Dressing the part was the one thing that came easily.

I imagined Hades' clothes, and made myself some version of that.

I summon one of the gowns, black and lace, embroidered with gold feathers and black roses. It shines and glitters, like the crown of dark thorns in my hair. I rouge my lips and line my eyes.

Libby whistles. "You don't look a thing like you," she comments, "but you do look badass."

Peony escorts me to the throne room, like my own personal guard. "Oracles are human," she explains as we walk. "In ancient times, it is said

that the power to divine the future was stripped from the faeries, for the chaos they could cause with it. It was given instead to those who could lie, so that they could guard the secrets of the heavens."

I'm not sure what I'm supposed to say to this, but I suppose it's why I've been told to dress so intimidatingly. The Oracle can lie. She needs a reason not to.

I'm to scare her into honesty.

"Oracles are gifted with immortal life for as long as they use their power," Peony continues. "There… there aren't many of them, anymore."

"Zera?"

"Zera."

It occurs to me Zera would never have let such power slip through her fingers. She would have interrogated them at first, made them tell her things.

I wonder what she learned, and am grateful they could lie.

At this, I freeze. If she had a way of divining the future, what if she already knew she would win?

Peony stops too. "Sephy?"

"Can… can oracles see only certain things, or…"

"Certain things, and likely things," Peony explains. "And they know the difference. Not everything is set."

There's a dozen other questions I could ask, but I've got the information I need. I sweep into the throne room and settle myself on the seat. It still feels wrong, not made for me. I call the dogs to heel and stroke their heads.

I am the Queen of Night. Queen of Night. Hell. The Underworld.

I am not Hades, but I am that.

An audience has been assembled, no doubt to give another show of power. They bow to me, but they mostly look surprised by the show. Everyone not out on patrol is there. Even Dad's been pried from the library. Libby stands beside him, looking as awkward as I've ever seen her down here.

Emetria appears at my elbow.

"Are you all right?" I ask her, barely glancing in her direction.

"Tired," she admits. "But safe. She took a great deal of convincing, and she has only agreed to a single audience. After tonight, I will take her to a place of safety, and have her location glamoured from me."

"Faeries can be glamoured?" This is news to me.

“The very weak from the very strong,” she clarifies. “Or willingly, otherwise.”

I recall that Hades was able to glamour me when I let him, even when Ares had failed to.

I like the idea of being stronger than him.

“Who will glamour you?” I ask her.

“Why, you. Who else? You’re the queen.”

Even sitting in this throne with the weight of a crown, it’s an easy thing to forget. Luckily, I’m an excellent actress.

The oracle is brought forth. I don’t know what I was expecting, but she isn’t it. She’s middle-aged, mortal-dressed, ordinary looking. She has huge glasses, an oversized cardigan, wrists that jingle with jewellery. She wouldn’t have looked out of place in the classics department of my father’s university.

“Your Majesty,” she says, dropping into a bow. She’s familiar with courtly manners, more so than I am.

I wonder how old she is, how long she’s lived amongst the fae, or what she does when she isn’t divining futures.

Blends in with the mortal world, apparently. Peony suggested it wasn’t safe for diviners in the courts.

“Welcome, Oracle,” I return, hoping I’ve chosen the right words.

“Your mother has bid me come to serve you. Ask your questions.”

I wish I’d had a little more time to prepare, and kick myself for not having used the past three days to do just that.

I pray Emetria will help me if I forget anything.

“Very well,” I say. “Hades. Is he alive?”

“You speak of the King of Hell, Hades XIII?”

“Yes.”

She pauses, and for all that I know her powers do not extend anywhere beyond herself, I swear the room darkens. There’s a coldness in the air as the entire court sucks in a collective breath, waiting.

The oracle’s eyes roll back in their sockets, turning mist-white. After the longest of seconds, they slide back to normal, but her voice is raspy and hollow. “Yes,” she says. “He’s alive.”

A breath looses from my throat. I’d convinced myself that he had to be, that I’d know if he wasn’t, but it’s a relief to hear someone else say it.

“Can we get him back?”

“You can,” she says. “But it will cost you.”

“Can you see what?”

“I cannot.” Another pause. “Should you journey into the pit, you may save him, but not without consequence. You will be betrayed and not betrayed, and shall unleash something that will alter the fate of all Faerie. Of this, I am certain.”

A dark murmur spreads through the crowd.

“We are already at war,” I tell her, before panic can erupt, before anyone has time to question our planned rescue. “We are already altering the fate of Faerie.”

She shrugs, as if what we are doing is of little consequence to what will unfold should we venture beneath.

“Can we defeat Zera?” I ask her.

“There exists nothing alive that cannot be defeated,” she says with a smile. *Remember that,* she seems to say.

I think for a moment, because nothing she has said so far deters me. I want to dive into the pit right now, consequences be damned. If he’s truly alive, if there’s even a chance—

Breathe. Think. “What do we need to do, to succeed in our quest to rescue Hades?”

The Oracle goes quiet again, eyes milky. “You need to ally with a king,” she announces in that thin, hoarse voice. “Although which, I cannot say. You need to seek an item to aid in your endeavours. It will be crucial to success.”

“What item is this?”

“It shall be revealed to you. It is not a weapon, but an escape rope.”

I am running out of questions. I glance at Emetria, hoping she will ask something.

She nods, understanding, and steps forward. “I have a question.”

“Speak it.”

“Over seventeen years ago, I sought out an oracle who gave me a false prophecy. Why?”

The Oracle winds back. “She was in Zera’s employ,” she says. “And she died for it.”

“Very well,” Emetria says stiffly. “If you have nothing further to impart, I shall escort you from this place to a safe location of your choosing.”

The Oracle raised a careful brow. “And glamour the location afterwards?”

“And glamour the location afterwards.”

The Oracle looks up at me. “Is there nothing else you wish to ask?”

I cannot think of anything. Hades is alive. We know a way to save him is close at hand. We know we need to seek a king, and we have few of those to pick from. And yet her gaze makes me think I *am* missing something.

I don’t know why she doesn’t just say it.

I look to Emetria, but she draws a blank too.

“I do not believe so.”

The Oracle looks at me. “You have more questions, more questions you’re afraid of, or don’t know to ask for, yet,” she says. “We will meet again, but only once. I will be ready for your questions, if you are ready to ask. Until that day comes… I bid you farewell. Good luck, half-queen. You shall need it.”

Emetria sweeps off the dais and escorts the Oracle from the room. It seems ludicrous that she's off again already, that the Oracle's words will have to wait to be untangled. Irma, at the side of the room, has scribbled everything down.

A half-hearted feast is laid out, to mark the occasion or to celebrate our minor victory the other day, I'm not sure. The atmosphere is dull, tempered. No one really feels like making merry.

But they don't feel like going hungry, either, so at least the food is eaten.

The hunters decide to get drunk and spar with blunt weapons. No one stops them. Dad saunters back to the library and I instruct Irma to ensure Libby doesn't imbibe too much faerie wine.

I trace my mark again, the way I once traced the lines of his face.

You're alive. You're alive and I'm coming for you.

Time passes. Hours roll by. Eventually Emetria returns. She looks around the room, and then up at me, and I understand that *I'm* supposed to clear it.

I can't work out if I ever want to get to the point in time where I'm used to being *queen.*

"Clear the room," I instruct the hunters, and my voice comes out much louder than I anticipated. "Quickly, now."

Irma starts clicking away the debris. I summon the war table. Artemis rolls out maps and plans. Libby hovers by the door, unsure of where to go, Dad having emerged once more from the library. Hippolyta tries to usher them away.

"No," I tell her, "they can stay."

Her dark eyes dart to Artemis, waiting for her confirmation. A flicker of something passes through me, and I understand in a different way than I did before why Hades went to such lengths to cultivate a terrifying reputation when he first took the throne.

“Artemis is your Lady, Hippolyta, but I am your *queen*. You need not look to her when I have already issued an instruction.”

I don’t know where the words come from, but I’m glad they did. Hippolyta stiffens and allows them in. Artemis actually looks impressed.

“So,” says Emetria, taking the goblet of spiced wine being proffered to her by Irma, “the Oracle has spoken.”

Irma darts about the rest of us, offering wine. My father politely requests a cup of tea instead, and is instantly obliged.

“With all the usual vague comments oracles are known for,” adds Artemis, unimpressed.

“Vague, but helpful,” Emetria insists. “For we now know we need to seek the assistance of a king.”

“Not too many of those, at the moment.”

“No.”

“I don’t suppose,” Apollo asks, “that we could just *make* a king, could we? We made Persephone a queen. I wouldn’t mind being Apollo, *King* of Sun.”

He flexes his arms. Artemis groans.

“And what help would *that* be?”

“We can’t make Apollo a king,” says Emetria, with a wave of dismissal. “Or anyone, for that matter. Persephone was different as the ruler of Hades has historically always been a monarch.”

“As is the ruler of the sea,” I say, with sudden understanding. “Poseidon __”

“He wasn’t among Zera’s allies during the takeover. He’d be a powerful ally. And we’ve not heard from him. If he’s undecided, we could sway him.”

We’d tried to recruit Hephaestus a few weeks back, hoping he could help us replenish our armouries, but he’d allied with Zera. She had a bigger army. A greater chance for glory. After that, we’d been hesitant to approach the Lord of the Sea, but he hadn’t formally pledged his allegiance to Zera, either.

“Does he count as a king?” Apollo says. “He’s still lord—”

Emetria waves a dismissive hand. “He’s a king in all but name.”

It makes sense. And with control of a circle, and the ability to approach directly, we’d be foolish not to ask for his assistance.

I wish I’d asked the Oracle who I could trust. “What about her warning?” I begin. “*Betrayed and not betrayed.* What could that mean?”

“Unfortunately,” says Emetria, “I fear we won’t understand the meaning of that until it’s too late.”

I groan. “I’m starting to see why Zera doesn’t like oracles.”

Libby snorts at this, but she’s the only one who does.

“What of this item we are to search for?” says Artemis, peering over Irma’s notes. “This… escape rope? It seems foolish to disregard that advice, nonsense though the rest may be.”

“Escape rope…” says my father uncertainly. Everyone ignores him, apart from me and Emetria, our gazes caught on his frowning face.

“Phillip?”

“One moment.”

He races back to the library.

“For the sake of considering all our options,” Artemis continues, paying no attention to my father, “are we sure it’s wise to consider trying to get Hades back at all?”

The table goes silent, and rage and fear and panic brew inside me, some great storm of emotion. I want to shout, or burst into flame, or—

“If you won’t save him for his sake, sister, or even Sephy’s,” says Apollo calmly, “perhaps consider saving him for the sake of the world.”

The rest of the table turns sharply towards him.

Artemis tilts her head. “What do you mean?”

“If he lives, he can still open the way back,” he says, and his gaze falls to each of us in turn. We’ve thrown the key into the dungeon.”

Nobody speaks about the fact that Hades was adamant about keeping the way closed, that he’d been prepared to sacrifice his life to do just that. That something would need to happen for him to open it again. Something awful.

I remember watching a horror movie with Libby and a couple of our other friends one night. I hated it. Blood and gore and psychological horror. I didn’t want to watch, but I couldn’t look away. But I remember one of the victims screaming, “I’ll never break!”

The villain, his voice like ice, said, “everybody breaks.”

And everybody does. It’s just a matter of when. If the titans find Luliver, they will break him.

And that will break me.

Dad returns with several thick, leather-bound volumes, each packed with post-it notes. He thumps them onto the table, getting Artemis’ attention, and thumbs to a page at the top of the pile.

“Ha, there!” he says triumphantly.

I peer over his shoulder. “Yeah, Dad? That’s all Greek to me.”

Libby and Apollo laugh. Irma rolls her eyes.

“Ah! Right,” he says, pushing his glasses further up his nose, “it talks of twin ropes which, when arranged into a circle, could be used to escape from any location within a realm. Portable transportation circles, if you will.”

We exchange glances. It’s a useful item in any situation. It’s a shame it can’t transport us into Tartarus, but it could be vital in navigating it; a way to get out the minute we find Hades.

“Where is it now?” Emetria asks.

Dad whips out another, newer book. “Well, two hundred years ago it was given to the reigning Poseidon. Reckon he’s still got it?”

We all pause, reeling back through the Oracle’s words. It can’t be that easy. *It can’t.*

“It’s too convenient,” I say eventually.

Emetria nods. “I agree. But I also think we need to visit him. We can’t afford not to.”

Of this, I am sure.

Dad starts unrolling scrolls and scribing bits of information to Irma, layouts of secret vaults and tidbits of information about the courts under the ocean. I expect someone to intercede and say they spent two decades down there and know all of this, but they don’t.

“Dad, you’ve been here less than a week, how do you know all this?”

“I’m a very fast reader,” he says curtly, eyes still on the book.

“Dad!”

“Fine, daughter mine. The truth of the matter is that when I discovered I was to be parenting a half faerie-child, I decided to learn absolutely everything I could about the culture. What you see here is the culmination of almost eighteen years of hardcore research.”

I blink at him. It’s not that this doesn’t make sense—it’s actually exactly the sort of thing I’d expect from my father—I’m just having a hard time realising I never noticed any of this research happening.

Dad frowns. “What is it?”

“I’ve been in your study. Where did you hide all the books?”

“In my office at work. Hidden in plain view.”

“Dad, that’s genius.”

He slides his glasses back up his nose, and takes a long sip of tea. “Professored.”

Emetria sends someone with a message asking for an audience with Poseidon, the meeting is adjourned, and finally, finally, she departs for some rest.

“Not you, Sephy,” she says, gesturing for me to follow. “I still have one more thing I must ask of you.”

She means I need to glamour away the location of the Oracle. I follow her obediently, into my old room—the one she’s using as hers. She’s changed nothing about it, even taming Pandora, who spends as much time with her as she does with me.

Mind you, I’m usually sharing my bed with an oversized, three-headed dog.

Dogs.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” I ask her. “We might still need her.”

She shakes her head. “I gave my word.”

For fae, their word is their bond. I wonder what would happen if I refused, but I don’t. I start to cast it, but her words stall me.

“I had your location glamoured from me, after I left you with your father,” she explains. “Just in case anyone ever found out about you, and used you against me. That’s why we could only meet at the park. I had no idea where you were, apart from somewhere in the city… but London is awfully big. I gave your father this box that he could drop letters into in case of emergency, and I had its twin at my residence. Occasionally he’d send me photos, other little bits of your life…” She shakes her head, lost in some old memory.

I swallow, the weight of it reaching me. “Who glamoured you?” I ask instead, to avoid addressing that confession.

“Angelo,” she says, whispering the name like I should know it. “Hades XII. Luliver’s father.”

I have heard nothing about this man, other than Hades—my Hades—was made to kill him. I think I saw an image of him once in the caverns. He

looked a lot like Luliver, but with eyes of flame-blue. He looked cold, distant. “What was he like?” I ask my mother.

“A good man,” she says, and smiles sadly. “Like his son. Always wanted to do the right thing and was seldom able to. He was not the best father, but then I suppose I cannot judge.”

I don’t have the energy to tell her she didn’t abandon me like this man did. She left me with the best father on the planet. He left his son with— “He should have taken Luliver away from Zera.”

“I think he wanted to, more than he could even admit to me. But he didn’t dare incur her wrath.”

“She never cared about him—”

“She cared about appearances. And we were risking a lot. A lot more than…”

Than one person. Than one small boy. No matter who he was to them, to *me,* he was still one person.

One person *I* would risk everything for, or near enough.

Before I can ask what they were risking, she reminds me about the glamour. I oblige, holding her gaze to mine, and her eyes go glassy. There’s no resistance, no tug. She lets me in freely.

“Do you remember what it is you’ve forgotten?” I ask her.

“Strangely, yes. I know I don’t know where she is. Odd.”

I snort at her surprise, and then remember her final words to the Oracle. “You said you sought out another oracle, seventeen years ago,” I start. “Was that for me?”

She looks down. “I had to be sure that you *were* human, not that you merely looked it. That oracle confirmed that you were.”

“No chance that she was just mistaken?”

“Not with something like this. Who you were has always been inside of you. It’s possible it was pushed to the surface by your proximity to this place, but it was still there. She lied.”

“For Zera.”

She nods. I’m not sure what to say about that, or what it means that Zera would kill the oracle to prevent her from speaking.

I don’t want to be afraid or worried any more than I already am.

“Angelo knew about you,” Emetria continues. “He was the only other person who did. It would have broken me to tell no one at all, and there was no one in the world I trusted more than him.”

“You weren’t in love with him or anything, were you? Because that would be a bit weird—”

“I loved him deeply. We had been friends for over three hundred and fifty years.”

Once more, I’m floored by the strength of the years, what you would mean to someone after that time.

“Faeries don’t often marry, and rarely for life,” she continues, reading something in my expression. “Can you imagine, spending centuries beside another person, and not coming to hate them just a little?”

Yes, I think, glad she cannot read my thoughts, because I can imagine that. I can imagine that with him. And it doesn’t matter that I’m young and shouldn’t know enough of the world, he’s etched into me. No one but him. Perhaps there are others in the world that I could love, but it would be a watery imitation. It could never come close.

“But our friendships endure far longer than romantic entanglements,” Emetria continues. “I feel it highly unlikely that I shall ever be as comfortable with another being as I was with Angelo. We understood one another, could tell anything to each other. Even Athena and I have never been like that towards one another. Never that easy.”

“Did he know about the rebellion as well?”

“We started it together.”

No wonder she was the first to learn of his injury. I am struck by the sudden thought of how awful that must have been for her, weighing up whether or not she could save him with the reality of what would happen if Ares took his place.

And why she couldn’t tell Hades how she knew about the attack.

She was so quick to assume he’d become the monster Zera had raised him to be, but it’s easy to believe the worst when you’re already clouded with grief.

“I’m sorry,” I tell her.

She frowns. “For what?”

“That you lost him. And Athena. And that things became so messed up between you and Luliver afterwards.”

She puts an arm around me. She can’t say it’s all right, of course, but the sentiment is there.

“We need to tell him everything, when we get him back,” I tell her.

She strokes my hair. “When we get him back, we will.”

I don’t know how she can say when, not if, but I’m grateful for whatever magic or logic lets me hear those words.

When, when, when.

Soon.

“When I went to the mortal world,” I tell her, “I got some memories back. Some of the times Luliver came to see me without you. I wondered if… I could have the rest?”

She stares at me for a long while. “I should have given them back ages ago. I should have thought—”

“You’ve been doing rather a lot,” I remind her. “I didn’t even think it was possible until it happened. I didn’t think either.”

Emetria takes my face in her hands, and presses her forehead to mine. There’s a rush of power, and my mind floods with images and sensations. The smell of sunscreen. The taste of creamy, vanilla ice cream. Me wiping it from Luliver’s nose.

I wouldn’t have noticed him blushing as a child, but my adult eyes see it clearly. They see how his gaze follows me. These memories are half mine, half Emetria’s. I feel everything, the warmth of him next to me as crisp as the sunlight.

Luliver, Luliver, Luliver.

He’s here. It’s like he’s here.

“Sephy?”

My eyes brim with tears, and I let myself cry, gathering each memory in front of me until I’ve worn it paper-thin.

A few days later, Poseidon responds to our message and agrees to grant us an audience. His message is brief and gives no promises, save that ‘no harm will come to us within the walls of his palace’. It makes Emetria nervous, but our options are limited. She makes us swear not to step outside the palace walls.

We agree to the meeting and send word that we’ll be arriving the following day.

“I think it’s time we sent a search party into the pit,” Artemis says, surprising us all. “We need intel. Just to scout the perimeter, see what we’re

dealing with. We can't go in blind."

"Are you sure?" Emetria asks. Artemis has never been willing to send her hunters before.

She nods. "We'll send four. We'll give them six hours. That should be enough time for us to meet with Poseidon and hopefully secure his rope."

"You don't want to wait until we have it?"

Artemis looks uneasy. "I cannot be the only one who feels like we're running out of time, like we're doing nothing, gaining nothing."

She is not, but it is strange coming from her. I wonder if she's been talking to Libby, or if she feels bad for her comments the other day.

Maybe she was just swayed by Apollo's words, the knowledge that everyone breaks, that he's been down there too long already.

Too long, too long. Far too long.

"My hunters stand ready," Artemis says firmly. "We shall send them in the morning." She looks to me for confirmation, and she has it.

I'm a bundle of nerves. I know I'll be expected to talk, to act like I'm the equal of this centuries-old king of the sea when I'm just a half-mortal child who has no idea what she's doing.

"I'm coming with you, right?" asks Libby later that day, as we ready for bed.

I hesitate, suddenly understanding how Hades must have felt when I declared I wanted to learn how to fight, suddenly overwhelmed by how mortal she is and how dangerous this could be.

Oh well, at least I know it's not a sexist thing.

Besides, Libby *can* handle herself. And even if she was the faerie and I was the mortal, I wouldn't want to wait for her to get back.

"Of course," I say.

"You hesitated."

"I'm inclined to spacing out."

"You don't want me there."

"I'm worried."

"What's the worst that could happen?"

I groan, flopping back against the bed. "Why would you say that? The last time you said something like that, I got kidnapped by faeries!"

"And that's turning out all right for you, isn't it?"

I glare at her. "It set off a chain of events which ignited a war and could result in the end of the world as we know it."

"Well, when you put it like that…"

I slide off the bed and head over to the dresser. I pick up a necklace and throw it towards her. “It’ll stop anyone from glamouring you,” I tell her.

Libby stares at it for a moment. “This was yours from before.”

“Yup.”

“Coincidence?”

“No.” I pause. “Hades gave it to me.”

She thumbs the pendant carefully. “I’ll take good care of it.”

“You’ve got more use for it than me. I’ve got other things—” *Not many, but I have them.*

“Sephy,” she says, with unusual gravitas, “I’ll take care of it.”

I wake in the night, unable to sleep, Libby’s arms flung over me. I slide out carefully, mindful of the dogs on the rug beneath, and slip out into the corridor for my customary walk.

The light is still on in the library, eking out in a thin sliver. I creep inside. Dad is awake, reading beside the fire in a large wingback chair. He’s reading, but his face is lined with shadows.

He sees me approach, and opens up his arm, folding his blanket around my shoulders as I slide in with him. I haven’t sat this way with him in a long, long time.

“Worried?” he asks.

“Yup. You?”

“Comes with the territory, alas. There’s not been a day I haven’t worried in almost eighteen years.”

I snuggle against him, feeling guilty and safe at the same time. “Hey, Dad?”

“Daughter?”

“Thanks for not freaking out when a strange faerie woman handed you a baby and told you to raise it.”

He laughs. “Ha! Don’t worry, I freaked out plenty.”

“Well, thank you for what came after. The whole raising me thing. It can’t have been easy—”

“Nothing worthwhile is,” he says. “But I’m afraid I cannot accept your gratitude, Seph. I still got the way better half of the bargain, I assure you.”

I lean my head against his shoulder, and stay there a little longer than I have done in a long while. He starts to read his book. It's not a history book, for a change. It's one of fairytales.

I nod off listening to stories of snakes marrying princesses, of princes transformed into swans, of stolen voices and happy endings.

I don't believe in them any more, but there's a second just before I drift off when they seem like less of a lie.

In some warm, liquid shape of the time that comes after, Emetria enters the room. I'm too tired to open my eyes, my thoughts gummy, but I feel a hand against my cheek. Smaller than dad's, softer. Just as warm.

The hand drops away, and a pleasant silence follows. I'm not quite sure what's happening, but I think Emetria's gaze turns to my dad.

"Thank you for everything you've ever done. She's perfect, Phillip."

"Well, it wasn't just me." He pauses, fingers stroking my hair. "Thank you for giving her to me."

"This… this is not me flirting with you," she says softly, "but please believe me when I say I could live a thousand years and never have chosen a better father for her."

"Thank you."

"Of course, I don't often date a lot."

"No, me neither."

"You've not been alone, all these years?"

"There was someone," he says. "It was complicated. I complicated things."

"Her loss."

"No, no it was both of ours, I fear. But no matter. If I have books and Sephy, I'm happy." He sighs. "Except I won't have her for much longer, will I? She's an adult next month. And she never really has been mine, has she?"

"She was yours the day you first held her."

He shakes his head. "You must know what I mean."

"I do," she says. "But no matter what happens, she will always be our daughter. We won't lose that." She squeezes his shoulder. "If you need any help uncomplicating things, I'm here for you, too. It's the least I can do."

I stare at my wardrobe, searching for something that says both, “I am a mighty and powerful queen, do not cross me” and “we’re friends, please help us.”

I feel like no outfit in the world can convey both, and no garment in the world can disguise my youth and inexperience.

Maybe I should have killed a bunch of people when I took the throne. That would have given me at least a fearsome reputation.

Not so good for making friends, though.

And not very me.

Libby sees my distress. She sighs, ushering me out of the wardrobe, and returns a few minutes later with a gown of golden taffeta. The skirt splits at the waist, revealing silken petticoats in an iridescent blue-pink, the colour of pearls. She forces it over my head and steers me toward the mirror, lacing me in. She hurls a pair of silver court shoes in my direction, covered in tiny clams, and throws a shoulder piece over one arm. It’s like a giant, bronze shell. It’s armour, but it looks like I’m honouring my host, not suggesting battle.

I look like a golden oyster, cracked open. It’s an apt metaphor for how I feel, but nothing about me looks like it’s breaking.

“Libby, you’re amazing.”

“I’ve got a gift,” she says dismissively. “Now *I* need to pick something. What says, ‘I’m the best friend any Queen of the Underworld could ever have’?”

She settles on a sweeping blue gown that hugs her hips before billowing out into layers of floating gossamer. She looks like a sea in summer. I give her free reign of my jewellery; she wisely takes my necklace of rowan berries.

“Don’t forget your crown,” she says sagely.

It’s a thick woven band of thorns, feathers and roses, black and gold. It shouldn’t go with the outfit, yet somehow, it does. It’s fairly vital to our plea to Poseidon to accept his right as king.

We have little to bargain with, other than to release him from Zera's control.

I hope it's enough.

A party meets us outside in the corridor. With some deliberation, Artemis has decided not to join us, declaring that her presence looks more like a threat than diplomacy. It's hard not to agree. It also seems foolish to send in four of the Eleven. Even three seems risky to some. But Emetria must attend, Apollo is well-liked and provides a sense of power without the intimidation, and I, of course, must go. I'm their figurehead.

Libby's coming too, and a sea-nymph named Lelamine who hails from his court.

Apollo makes a joke about his cohort of beautiful ladies. Artemis smacks him round the back of the head. He apologises.

I'm grateful for the joke, it detracts from my nerves, both the ones swirling with the thought of the Undersea and the ones coiling with dread around the idea of opening the Pit again.

We've kept the mission under wraps in case our enemy hears word, but our troops cannot fail to notice something in the air as we march from the palace. The observant will have noticed the patrols tightening around the gate's location, in case Zera manages to break through during the tiny gap when it is open. Although we expunged her forces from it, that doesn't mean we're safe. Nothing is.

I don't like this. I don't like it at all.

I wish I didn't know any of the people who'd volunteered. Hazel and Willa are going, along with Pickal, a lithe scout with the eyes of a goat, and a faun named Daave. They're all nice people. I don't like them diving into the unknown.

Hades would hate it, too. Sometimes I think that's why he didn't have friends. Not because he didn't care for them, but because he cared entirely too much.

They smile as we make our way there, Pickal and Daave making jokes. Hazel pipes, and Willa composes a ballad in their honour.

"Down into the pit we go, the pit we go, the pit we go,
To gates of hell, below, below.
To things unknown and glory great,
Rather than four, we ought to take eight!"

It's forced.

You can lie with a look, Hades once told me.

And a song too, apparently.

We arrive at the pit. The giant resurrected Cerberus stands at the gates. After Zera cut them down the second time, there wasn't a great deal of flesh left to put them back together, and what we did have was… messy. They're just a skeleton, now, and it's hard to say if they look better or worse that way. I stroke their bony snouts as we move past, but there's no reaction. Bones are not souls. Bones are just weapons.

Libby shivers, but then says, almost brightly, "Can I have a weapon made of the bones of some great monster?"

"Bone shatters," says Artemis, looking at where I've patched up the Cerberus with chicken wire.

"I could have a fancy bone-handled weapon though, right?"

"When you've earned it," she says with a smile.

The seal glitters ahead of me, a quiet rumble in the ground. My heart bangs like a drum.

The last time this opened, I lost Hades.

This doesn't feel like I'm getting him back.

"Are you ready?" Emetria asks.

"I wonder at faeries asking that question at all," I say, but do not answer. Such a faerie way of speaking, of avoiding a lie. I draw my rapier.

I know how to do this because I watched Hades do it. That only makes it harder, and I tremble in anticipation.

I don't want to do this I don't want to do this I don't want to—

Artemis readies her team. Apollo stands by to fly down and scout before the rest descend, to check for immediate threats like pits of lava or all-powerful titans ready to kill us.

You will be betrayed and not betrayed.

Artemis hands her scouts devices, magically spelled to track the passage of time. "Six hours," she reminds them. "No more."

They all nod.

I plunge my rapier into the ground.

Vibrations tremor through the air, crawling into my bones. The ground around me crumbles. Not wasting a second, Apollo shoots down into the rising light. I keep my grip tight on the hilt of my blade, trying not to count the seconds he's gone.

He shoots up again.

"No lava pits," he reports, breathless. "No titans or monsters waiting to gobble us up."

No Hades either, awaiting rescue. But of course there isn't. Because he would have got himself out by now, if it was so easy.

A rope ladder is tossed over the side and secured beside the rocks. The group descend. Hazel flashes me a grin. Apollo dives down again, to ensure they've reached the bottom safely. The ladder is hauled up.

"Close it," says Emetria. "Quickly."

I wrench my rapier free. The seal knits back together like fabric, and I feel in my flesh. When it's complete, I hand the blade to Artemis. We cannot go armed into Poseidon's court, not when we are attempting to make a show of peace.

I don't realise until it's gone that I've grown used to the weight.

The pit reseals itself.

"Come on," says Emetria, tugging at my arm. "We shouldn't tarry."

She means that it's pointless to worry, that I can do nothing for them, that I have a job to do and need to stay focused.

She's right, of course.

It doesn't help.

Without our resident bards, the journey to the circle is long and quiet. Libby tries to lighten the mood by telling mortal jokes and repeating lines from our favourite films and TV shows. Only Apollo understands any of the references. Artemis might have got some of the superhero ones, but she stayed to guard the circle.

She can't do any good there, but I know why she won't leave. Not while her hunters are below.

"What was it like?" I ask Apollo quietly. "Tartarus?"

For a moment, he is silent. "Bare," he says eventually. "Not flaming pits—more plains and nothing."

I don't bother asking what else he saw. I know it will only distract me.

"So, might be a silly question, but we're not going to drown in Poseidon's court, right?" Libby asks.

Emetria smiles. "No. You won't drown."

"Oh, good. Will I ruin my hair? Because it's looking pretty fine today."

"I concur, good lady," says Apollo. "Why, you are mayhap the finest maiden—"

“Yeah, no,” says Libby.

“Very well.”

He slides over to Lelamine, who is soon alight with giggles. Libby rolls her eyes.

We arrive at the circle and step inside.

“Hold onto me,” Emetira instructs. “Let’s not get lost.”

We all reach out to touch a little of her. Libby clutches onto my arm as we whirl away, stomachs flipping with the sudden movement. Light swallows us.

When the light dissipates, we are standing in a round, blue chamber. The walls glimmer, and behind that shine, things move. As my eyes adjust, I realise that there is little in the way of wall at all, that we’re in some kind of bubble on the sea bed below. A dark ocean churns above, shoals of silver fish glinting in the reef.

Libby presses against the bubble, but it does not budge, membranous as it appears.

“Whoa,” she says, and her voice comes out slightly echoey and distorted. The air feels strange, thicker, and my clothes cling to me differently. My free hair drifts.

Water, and not water. I can breathe as easily as air.

Two guards with long blue tails bow to us, snapping their spears to their chests.

“Hail and welcome,” they declare.

Emetria looks to me.

“We are glad to be received,” I say, echoing the words she taught me. “Please, take us to Lord Poseidon.”

The guards right themselves. “Of course, my lady—”

“Your Majesty,” Emetria prompts. “My daughter is a queen.”

“Ah, Your Majesty,” one returns. “Forgive us. We must ask, at first, that you surrender all weapons.”

“We are unarmed,” says Emetria, “as you see.”

They give us a quick glance, but they do not search us. Of course they don’t. There were upsides to not being able to lie.

We’re taken down a long corridor and emerge in a colossal throne room, a space all at once elegant and savage. A ceiling of pearl shimmers above us, but the pillars are living things, clustered in barnacles and seaweed. Live starfish and crabs scuttle across walls of reef, and the tables and chairs are carved of bone. A banquet has been laid out, golden knives

beside oyster-bowls the size of hubcaps. A stuffed shark is laid out at the centre, and a group of selkies with seal-skins slung over their backs and razor-sharp teeth are tearing into it.

Poseidon sits ahead of us on a throne of clam and bone. Barnacles grow at the base, but it's suspended on a pillar several feet above us, his long blue tail drifting in the watery air. He wears a golden breastplate adorned with shells and fangs, a crown atop his ink-blue hair. His dark, golden skin is swirled with black markings.

He might be styled Lord of the Sea, but he's every bit a king.

"Emetria!" he declares, sweeping off the throne, "How good it is to see you here in our halls again. It has been a long time."

Emetria bows, as do we all. I'm conscious of the eyes on us, of the number of people in the room, of the fact they can defy gravity while most of our group are earth-bound. Artemis' training has sunk in. I'm eyeing the cutlery, searching for weapons, a way to make my escape if I need to.

"Indeed, Lord Poseidon," returns Emetria. "Thank you for agreeing to meet."

"I could hardly refuse." He gestures to a table nearby, thankfully devoid of selkies. "Will you sit?"

"We'd be honoured."

We glide into place against the stiff-backed chairs. Libby wriggles in hers and pokes the armrest. "Wait, is this *bone*?" she hisses at me, her voice low.

I ignore her. Dishes are passed around, pink strips of tuna in a white sauce, a peppery seaweed, raw oysters. I take a little, not hungry but not wanting to dishonour our host. A savoury tea is served in shell cups. It tastes of salt and rice water.

Apollo slurps up several oysters and downs his beverage in one. "Excellent as always, My Lord. It's been too long indeed."

Poseidon smiles at this, but says nothing else. He's barely looked my way at all.

"Lord Poseidon, you must know we come to discuss—" Emetria starts, but he holds up a hand.

"Please, Emetria, let us eat first. There is always time for pleasantries."

The guards part at the door, and a familiar person drifts into the throne room. I stiffen. It's Aphron, deity of love and beauty, looking even more ethereal with their white skirts drifting in the current. Their face, their entire body, is like sculpted marble, reed-slim and flawless. Bright copper hair

drifts around their shoulders, and their eyes are like kaleidoscopes, a hundred shifting colours at once. When those eyes meet mine, they turn to gold.

The last time we met, we were enemies, although I don't remember Aphron fighting me directly. I *do* remember I stole their celestial weapon, and that it was lost to the pit with Hades.

I wonder if they're mad about that.

"Aphron, your magnificence," says Emetria, rising. We all do the same, although as a queen I'm probably not supposed to. "We did not think to find you here—"

"Relax, Emetria darling, I'm not here for a fight. I'm just here to enjoy myself."

Emetria's shoulders sag. If there is a trap to be had, it will not come from them. More benefits to no lies. "Will you join us?"

"Happily." They slide into a seat beside me, winking. "Looking lovely, Your Majesty. The fae life suits you."

I do not know what to say to this, only that I should say something. I mutter a thanks.

"You're welcome, sweet thing, although the look of heartbreak you're wearing clashes terribly with that outfit."

I think of lying, of telling them I don't know what they're talking about, but of course I do, and I can't disguise it. I wonder if everyone can see it, or if it's an Aphrodite-power. Hades can reanimate the dead and summon flames, Demeter can heal and make plants grow, Aphrodite sees love, and can encourage people to confess their desires.

Either way, I hate it.

Aphron rubs an elegant hand under their chin, their eyes flickering with colour. "I've unnerved you."

"I'm not sure what I'm supposed to say to that."

"Say what you feel."

I *feel* a strange kind of panic, a tightening in my chest, the pressure of tears. "There aren't words."

Aphron nods, misty-eyed. "That is, in itself, a feeling, I'm sure." They drink from their cup. "Tell me… what would you do to stop feeling that way? To get him back?"

At this, I freeze, glancing desperately across the table at Emetria, but she's chatting to Poseidon. Apollo is regaling Libby and Lelamine with a tale

of his youth. No one is watching me. No one is here to steer me in the right direction.

Aphron has sided with Zera. They said they weren't here to fight. That doesn't mean they won't search for intel. Or even…

Or even see if I wouldn't be willing to help *them*. If I would open the gate if they promised to get Hades back for me.

My heart thumps in my ears, guilt and fear intermingling in my gut.

Because a part of me considers it.

"Tell me," Aphron continues, when I don't reply. "What do you desire most in the world?"

Their honeyed words pour into my ears like a glamour.

"Hades," I whisper, because I don't think I can lie about this. "But it doesn't matter how much I want him."

Aphron cocks their head. "No?"

"There are worse things in the world. Bad things that will happen if I try to get him back."

"Worse for others, maybe. But not you."

I swallow, because they're right, and I don't want them to know it. "I would be a poor queen if I just did what I wanted."

Aphron's eyes shimmer. "Indeed. You would."

Something that I said got them, and they turn back to their plate. Our corner of the table goes quiet.

"The rumours about him were just rumours, weren't they?" says Aphron softly. "All those awful things he did… He never did them. He wasn't a monster at all, was he? I saw that when I watched him fall. He didn't just do it for you. He thought it was the right thing to do. And he was prepared to die for it."

I nod my head, because my words have deserted me.

Aphron stares at their cup, and I wonder if they're thinking of the queen they've chosen to follow, and whether she would die for anything.

I turn back to Emetria's conversation. It's slid into the political. She's offering him a title, a chance to be free. Poseidon's responses are neutral or quiet. I sense he's keen to avoid giving an answer at all, and we must have one.

As well as something else.

"There is another thing we should like to discuss, My Lord," I interject, my voice measured. It is easier to act a queen when I don't want to be

myself, when I want a mask to cover the broken-hearted girl so painfully clear in Aphron's eyes.

Poseidon's dark gaze turns to me. He looks surprised to discover I have a voice at all. "We seek an item that may be amongst your possessions," I continue. "A golden rope of transportation." It might be dangerous to ask such a thing with Aphron present, but the rope could have multiple uses, and hopefully my earlier speech might have dissuaded them from thinking a rescue attempt is being engineered.

"Oh?" He clears his voice. "We may have such a thing, in our vaults below."

"I'm not sure I like the sound of 'may'."

He barks a laugh. "Ha! I say 'may' because I do not know. I've only been Poseidon for a couple of decades, you know, not enough time to inspect everything."

I blink at this, because it seems incredulous that he wouldn't have had time in twenty years to inspect his treasure. People who live forever have *very* different concepts of time.

"We would be willing to pay handsomely for it," I add. "And it needn't be a permanent acquisition, either." I leave out any more of a definitive timeframe, conscious of Aphron beside me.

"Well, we ought to see if we have it first, shouldn't we?" He claps his hands, and the empty plates disappear. "Let us investigate the vaults. It's quite the treasure trove."

I feel uneasy, but I study his words. He couldn't have known what we would come for. He genuinely doesn't know if the rope is down there.

"Ooh, the vaults!" Aphron claps their hands. "I have *got* to see them!"

Poseidon bristles, just a fraction, and I pray it's only Aphron's enthusiasm that irks him. "Of course. Come."

We make our way down through the winding passageways, passed armoured guards, deep into the belly of the sea. It's bizarre to see people with tails just *hovering* in this water-like air. Libby can't stop staring, muttering things under her breath.

Eventually, we arrive at a perfect oval, cut into a hole in the floor, protected by a giant bubble. Something glimmers in the depths beneath. Poseidon swirls his fingers, and the bubble dissipates. He drifts downwards.

The rest of us are hesitant. The force of gravity is clearly delayed here, but it's still a long way to the ground.

Lelamine goes first, used to this. Apollo flexes his wings and turns to Libby, grinning. She darkens her eyebrows and puts her arms around my shoulders instead. I unfurl my wings and jump.

I extend them to slow our fall, still not convinced it would be safe to do so without. Emetria jumps down fearlessly, in a trail of blue and purple skirts, a sunset over the sea. Apollo leaps last, drifting leisurely. I think we could crawl back up without our wings, but it wouldn't be easy, like wading through mud.

The vault is beyond enormous, and I understand at once why Poseidon might not know every treasure in his hold. There are entire ships down here, wrecked and gutted, piles of gold and jewels spilling from their bowels. Statues the size of buildings tower above us. It's a city of gold.

"Oh *my*!" Aphron gasps. "Poseidon, this is beautiful! I could stay down here forever!"

"Let's hope it's not that long," he says, with a mournfulness about his voice.

I turn sharply. He's far above us, close to the exit. Before any of us can move, he's darted through it and swept the barrier back into position.

"Poseidon!" Emetria cries. "You promised no harm would come to us within your walls!"

"Aye," he said, "I did. But when you said you wanted to visit the vaults, I couldn't resist. They are below my palace, not within it." He shakes his head. "I am sorry, Emetria. For old time's sake. I never wanted to be your enemy."

"I am *not* your enemy!" Aphron insists, trying to struggle upright through the current and not getting very far. "Zera will not be pleased when she hears of this!"

"I think you and I both know that Zera would trade either one of us to get her hands on the key to the pit, or the leader of the rebellion."

"If you believe that," says Emetria icily, "I wonder at your allying with her."

"I have little love of Zera, it's true. But neither am I fond of humanity. There may be pretty bits to them, but they're still a blight. You have lived among them for too long, old friend. You have not seen the scourge of their endeavours, the damage they have wrought to my realm, to their own world. Athena understands. Humanity is a plague that must be contained. There is no other way."

“I can think of a few, less murdery ones,” I mutter darkly. “Genocide is rarely the answer.”

Poseidon laughs. “You should pay more attention to your history books, little girl.”

Maybe I’ll write them, I think, which is a dumb thing to suggest. All I know is that I’m angry, and I don’t want to die.

I’m not *going* to die.

Poseidon disappears, and a stillness follows. The waters turn icy and dark.

“Fan out,” Emetria tells us. “Find the rope if you can, but look for anything else that will help us.”

It seems impossible that we’ll ever find the rope in this great, cavernous place. We could search for days.

And I need to be back in a few hours.

If I don’t, the scouts are likely dead.

I should never have agreed to this.

Focus, Sephy.

Apollo is using his wings to navigate the space more easily, propelling himself through the water. Libby clambers into one of the ships. Lelamine heads to the deeper parts of the cavern, and Emetria scales a pile to oversee the area, doubtless formulating some plan in her head, trying to work out where it’s more likely to be. Not in anything too new, I suppose, if it’s been here for centuries. That doesn’t rule out much but the luxury yacht in the corner.

Aphron starts digging through a pile of coins.

“You’re helping?” I frown.

“I have vested interest in staying alive.”

“Zera won’t kill you.”

“No, but something else might.”

I don’t know what to say about that, and I don’t want to focus on it. I need to do something, anything.

You’re Hades, says a voice inside, one I don’t like to acknowledge. *Hades could summon things with a snap of his fingers.*

In the Underworld. Where we are not.

You still have power, Persephone. Use it.

It’s easier thought than done.

I think about what Emetria is doing, trying to narrow down the possibilities. I think about the way summoning works, how you need to

imagine what you want.

Please, I pray to whatever gods there be, *I have to get us out of here. I have to find him.*

I imagine a golden rope, fixating on the knots, the fibres, the feel of it. I look out over the treasures, and a sharp pull tugs at my chest, almost the opposite of summoning. Like I'm being summoned myself.

I follow it to a mound of coins and jewels. Libby follows me, sliding out of one of the ships. She studies my face for a moment, and then throws herself into the pile like a child in a snowbank. She waves her arms, disrupting the coins. Gold glitters against the black of her hair.

"What?" she says, when I stare at her. "If we're going to be killed by an evil queen, I want at least one moment of rolling around in absolute wealth like Scrooge McDuck."

She flips herself over and clambers to the top of the mound, bouncing slightly. I wonder if the rope is buried underneath, or if I'm totally wrong.

"This mound feels funny," she reports.

I raise an eyebrow. "Stood on many mounds of gold and jewels?"

"No, but…" She crouches down, pushing against the coins. She starts to dig them away, eventually coming to a small pile that don't move at all. "Odd…"

Apollo senses something is happening, and drops down to join us. We scramble through the pile, and eventually reveal a hatch, formed of coins welded together.

Hidden in plain sight, and a mortal trick, too. If it had been glamoured, most faeries could see through it, or see something strange about it. And it would have worn off, eventually.

"It's locked," says Libby, finding a keyhole.

"Not for long."

Apollo's hands burn bright white. He presses his fingers against the lock, and melts it into a golden puddle. He looks up at Libby as if he expects her to be impressed.

Instead, she pulls a face. "You couldn't have tried that on the bubble door?"

"My magic isn't going to overrule Poseidon's. You don't think he would have thought of that?"

I ignore them both, lifting up the hatch. A small chamber is revealed beneath. I drop down into it.

Treasures unlike the ones above are arranged on podiums around it. There are helmets, breastplates, arm guards. A diadem, a few goblets. No weapons.

But two long pieces of rope, coiled like snakes.

My heart leaps with a sick kind of relief, an elation, that I'd almost forgotten how to feel.

I have them.

I scramble back through the hole. "Guys, I—"

A scream cuts me off.

Emetria bolts towards me. Aphron crawls through the current.

"Lelamine," I say. "Where's—"

Her scream is cut short, replaced by the awful sound of something cracking. The air seems heavier, darker. It stirs and judders, like a whisper of thunder.

From one of the entrances to the other caverns, Lelamine emerges. She's limp, her eyes glassy, and obviously dead. Something is wrapped around her middle, thick as a tree trunk and covered in suckers.

A tentacle.

A monstrous creature slides out of the dark, green, slimy, and covered thorny scales. A giant mouth sits in the centre of a body fringed with eight long legs.

A kraken. A monster of the deep.

Emetria slides in front of us, but she isn't armed. None of us are. I look at her, waiting for instructions, but she freezes.

"Mother?" I ask. "What should we—"

She shoves Libby and myself into the cavern. Apollo grabs Aphron and stuffs them in afterwards. We pack into the space, limbs tangling together.

The vault rumbles. Something shudders. The monster has wrapped itself around us.

"Now what?" shrieks Aphron.

Apollo tumbles about, grabbing the plate armour from the stand and buckling it on. I take the armguards, whatever good they'll do.

"We need a weapon," I hiss.

"Will this do?" Libby fumbles underneath her skirts and draws out a long knife.

"How did you—"

"I figured no one would check me if you all swore we were unarmed. Ah, the benefits of mortality."

“Libby, that’s—”

“Brilliant, yes, I know.”

She hands it over, just as the vault gives another lurch. Something snaps.

“We have *one knife* against a kraken?” Aphron says, aghast. “One knife against a *kraken*?”

“It’s a very young kraken,” says Apollo, helpfully.

Aphron’s eyes fall to the rope in my lap. They seize one of the pieces. “Is this what you were talking about earlier?”

“Yes, but it can’t transport you unless—”

“Give me one of the pieces.”

I freeze. “No—”

“I swear to you, I will do everything in my power to get you out of here, but you need to give me one of the pieces, and keep that monster distracted long enough so that I can convince the guards to let me out of here.”

Something else splinters. Libby screams. The vault is shattering like the shell of a nut. We have seconds, minutes—

Aphron squeezes my arm. “You have nothing to lose!”

I sigh, nodding, and go to the hatch. A giant tentacle is smothered over the opening, but a short jab of my knife sends it reeling backwards. I fling the hatch open and stumble into the main vault.

Apollo streams afterwards, wings extended. He punches the kraken in one of its eyes, his fists blazing. The watery air is dampening his powers, but the kraken’s scales scream beneath the force of his blows. It’s tentacles arch upwards, trying to swat him away. Apollo dodges every blow, his wings more like propellers. I fling myself into the air too, trying to give it another target. The knife has little in the way of reach; I have to dart from its writhing tentacles.

Emetria and Libby hurl sharp jewels at its face, but we are all too slow here.

Aphron begins their slow climb to the entrance. I hear them screaming, trying to alert the guards. “I have what they were after! Let me out!”

I can’t watch to see if they’re successful, but Emetria arranges our remaining rope in a perfect circle on the ground. I hope she knows how to use it, that Aphron can figure it out their end.

The kraken swipes. I plunge my knife into its sucker and slice downwards. It reels, letting out a low wail, its huge, gummy mouth

floundering.

No teeth.

Maybe it *is* young.

My stomach churns, partly with the thought of something bigger existing somewhere, but also with the weight of the awful, awful plan brewing in my head.

It smashes at a pile of treasure, sending an avalanche of coins in Libby's direction. I race down to snatch her out of the way.

"Apollo!" I call. "Distract it!"

"I *am* distracting it!"

I deposit Libby on a nearby boat, glancing back at the monster, a writhing forest of tentacles.

I hate my plan. I'm waiting for another one to form, but Lelamine's body is hovering in the water, and it could be Libby's next. It could be *mine* next.

Not losing another second, not risking another life, I stream towards its monstrous mouth. If any of the tentacles catch me before I get there, I'll be as dead as Lelamine.

I try not to think about that as I slide into its slippery mouth.

I hear Emetria scream, but the sound is cut out by its jaws chomping down. I'm being sucked down into a thick, oozing tunnel.

I stab my heels into its gullet, slowing my descent. Its throat splutters, hacking, trying to jerk me free. I refuse to be swallowed. *Refuse.*

Cold flesh squeezes against me, sticky darkness.

There were other ways I could have done this, but I wasn't confident of our ability to keep all appendages at bay, or in the reach of my knife, or the anatomy of a kraken.

But I'm fairly sure ramming my blade into the roof of its mouth will do something to deter it.

The monster gives another lurch. My legs slide down its gullet. I shriek, scrambling upwards, as its toothless jaws snap and judder.

Come on, come on.

I screw my feet into the bottom of its mouth, and drive my weapon upwards. Something thick gushes out when I withdraw it and plunge it in again, and again, the soft, dank muscles shuddering around me.

The mouth opens, and I tumble out, covered in green blood, coughing and spitting. My vision is blurred by mucus.

Apollo yanks me to my feet, the tentacles still spasming around me. He wipes the blood from my cheeks. It sloughs off into the thick air in palpable smears. “Hurt?” he asks.

I shake my head.

Emetria flings herself at me. Libby looks too relieved to move. She stands beside the circle of rope.

I glance upright. Aphron has vanished.

Panic floods through me. I recall their words, searching for a way they could have wriggled out of their promise. *Everything in my power.*

But if they were captured, if Poseidon took them elsewhere, that power could easily have been surrendered.

The rope starts to glow.

“Hurry!” shouts a voice through it, warbling and distorted.

With a final look at Lelamine, her body hovering just above the ground, I do.

We emerge next to the teleportation chamber. The guards are slumped against the wall, with dazed, dreamy-eyed expressions.

“They won’t be like that for long,” Aphron says, pulling us through the circle. “So let’s hurry.”

“You’re… you’re coming with us?”

“Well, I can hardly stick around here after helping you, can I? Zera will have my neck.” They brush their elegant fingers across their long, pale throat. “And it’s such a pretty neck…”

Emetria emerges last, tugging the other piece of rope through and breaking the circle. It snaps shut behind her. She winds up both pieces and secures them into her belt.

The guards start to stir.

“Come on,” Emetria says, grabbing my elbow. “We need to get back.”

The circle swirls, and we are gone.

By the time we get back to the palace, the six hours are almost over. There's just enough time to clean up before heading out again, our hair still damp. Apollo dries us as we make our way towards the gate, still reeling for the incident at Poseidon's court. No one is in any mood to regale people with the tale. We stick to the basics: Poseidon is no ally. Lelamine is dead.

Hippolyta is less than happy we've brought Aphron back with us, and Aphron is less than enthused about the sleeping arrangements, but they give their oath they will not report to Zera or any of her forces, and they're left under the careful eye of the hunters. There will be more questions and better promises later, but there is no time.

The lightness of the air and the darkness of the world feels strange against the feel of the sea. My gait feels both heavier and lighter.

"We ought to compose a ballad in your honour," says Apollo. "Persephone Kraken-Slayer, Queen of Hell, Lady of Night—"

"Defender of the downtrodden, completer of the craft projects," Libby adds. "Badass with a blade and a needle."

I smile, but it's a weak one. My mind is on other things.

Like how, once we've reviewed the intel given to us by the scouts, we could set off as soon as tomorrow.

Tomorrow. I could have him back, *tomorrow.*

It's too much to hope that the scouts have found him already, but I find myself hoping for it nonetheless.

I know Emetria won't want to set off tomorrow. She'll want to search for the king we're supposed to ally with. But she won't take much convincing. She wants him home, too.

Artemis leaps up as we approach the Pit, her form stiffening as she counts our number. "Lelamine—"

We hang our heads.

"A trap," Apollo says. "Poseidon is no ally. But we secured the rope, at least."

There's grief in her eyes, but she keeps it controlled. "We shall not let her sacrifice go in vain."

"No one's," he agrees.

Her timing device goes off a few minutes later. I unsheath my rapier and open the seal. We throw down the ladder, and wait.

And wait.

Nothing happens. The ladder is still.

Artemis glances at Apollo. He flips open his wings and dives into the Pit.

They're just a bit late, I try to convince myself. *Who hasn't been a little late, once in a while? Apollo will find them. I'm sure he will…*

As the seconds tick by, I give up all hope for the hunters returning with Hades.

Another minute passes before Apollo circles up, shaking his head.

"They're… not there," he reports.

"No," I say.

Emetria looks at me. "We should… close the way. Think about what to do—"

"No!"

My wings arch out, barely consciously, and I plummet into the hole. It's like breaking through paper, swimming through a fog, both endless and over all at once.

I arrive in an empty valley, sparse, bare, grey. Spindly, leafless trees are splattered about flaky earth. Everything is hard and sharp and devoid of colour. There's something like a sky, but there's sun in it, no real light. There's no real anything. A failed craft project, an empty board.

I can see for miles, the cracked plains beyond the valley, and there's nothing.

Nothing.

"Hades!" I scream. "*Luliver*! Where are you?"

My voice echoes.

"*Luliver*!" I scream again. "I'm here! I've come for you! *Where are you?*"

Where are you, where are you, where are you?

A storm gathers in the distance, rolling towards me. Something flaps above, and Apollo appears beside me.

"Sephy." His voice is soft. "We can't stay—"

"I'm not leaving without him! Not again. I won't. I can't. *Please.*"

Apollo's arms come towards me, but I struggle free of his grip, racing towards the storm. *I can find him, I can find him, I will. I have to.*

Apollo's grip tightens around me. I fight against him, but he's stronger, and the storm grows closer. Not real. Not natural.

I go limp. It's easier than fighting, but as long as I don't make myself move, it's not like I'm leaving him, either. It's not truly like abandoning him, all over again.

They want to call a meeting right away, but decide to give me a moment. I don't know precisely what I'm supposed to do in that moment. If I start crying, I won't stop. If I break now, I think it might all be over. At some point I will splinter into shards so minute that nothing and no one will ever be able to put me back again.

Everyone breaks.

I am not OK.

You get to feel whatever you feel.

I sit on the edge of my bathtub and think of everything and nothing, my mind fluttering between nightmare scenarios and plain numbness, before being reminded of the only important thing:

Hades.

He is not dead. It is not over.

I am the Queen of the Underworld. He will never be lost to me. I will drag him back from the beyond, if necessary. While there is breath in my lungs, he lives too.

I march to the war room.

"I'm not giving him up," I declare. "Nor the other scouts we sent there. I know we have no intel. I know it's a huge risk. But I swear I will go down there myself if none of you will help."

There is silence for a moment. "I do not wish to sacrifice my hunters either," says Artemis. I wait for the but. It doesn't come.

"Then—"

"I want to amass a small force and go down there to get them back. Better armed, better equipped. More prepared. Myself."

Emetria says nothing. Sending both Artemis and the reigning Hades into the pit is a ballsy move, but it may be what we need.

“I, too,” says Apollo, with a lingering look at his sister.

Even worse.

“This is a terrible idea,” says Emetria, voicing what we all know. “To leave the Underworld so vulnerable—”

“We need to search for the king to aid us,” offers Hippolyta. “Like the Oracle suggested.”

“You guys had an oracle?”

I spin. Aphron is sitting on the steps to the throne, skirts artistically arranged around them. A fruity cocktail sits in an elegant, newly-painted hand. They give a cheery wave.

“What are you doing here?” I demand.

“Still waiting to find out what you guys are planning to do with me.”

I blink at them.

“I gave you my oath that I would get you out of there and that I wouldn’t tell Zera anything about you. I’d like an oath in return.”

“What… what kind of oath?”

“Well, first off an oath not to murder me in my sleep or any other time would be *fabulous,* but as I suspect you can still lie, I’d like someone else to make it on your behalf.”

I glance at Emetria, giving her permission, but Aphron cuts across her before she can speak.

“I’m not done. I’m fine with throwing in my fealty with you lot until this war is over, but I want something else.”

“You’d throw Zera over so easily?” Artemis eyes them suspiciously.

“You really underestimate how fond I am of staying alive.” They wave a hand. “I was never Zera’s greatest fan. I like the mortal world, you know. It’s vibrant and exciting and *fun.* Not something you’re familiar with Artemis, I’m sure.”

Her glare narrows further.

“Anyway, I’m not a big fan of any future where I can’t go to bottomless brunch or drink mimosas on a yacht in Ibiza, but I allied with Zera, because, in case you haven’t noticed, she’s terrifying. I choose life. Every time.”

“Then what do you want from us?” Emerita asks. “For we have no plans to harm you; we owe you a debt.”

“Dione,” they say. “If full-on war is what transpires, I want you to capture her, not kill her. Not unless you have no other choice.”

At this, Emetria bows her head, and her eyes dart silently to the throne. Thinking of *her* Hades. Angelo. Of a friend she couldn’t save.

“Done,” I say, without deliberation.

“Really?” Aphron bats their long-lashed eyes. “Because you are not her biggest fan and she *really* wants to murder you.”

“I’m not into murdering,” I tell them, hoping my honesty comes across. “And for what it’s worth, I’m sorry I hurt her.”

Aphron waves a hand, as if half-blinding someone is little more than a school yard fight. Faeries are *strange.* “She probably deserved it,” they say.

All of us prickle at that.

“What? I love her to pieces but I still know she can be a bitch. I kinda like that about her, most of the time.”

We all repeat the oath to spare Dione.

“Excellent,” they grin. “Now the Oracle told you to find a king?”

“She did.”

“So that’s why you went to see Poseidon?”

We nod.

“And who was next on your list?”

We look at each other, casting furtive glances.

Aphron rolls their eyes. “You’ve no idea where to go next?”

Emetria opens her mouth, but quickly closes it.

“Well?” Aphron states.

“It’s foolish,” she says.

We all look at her.

“Who were you thinking of?” Artemis prompts.

“It’s obvious, isn’t it?” Aphron smiles. “You’ve got to ask King Valerian.”

“Valerian?” shrieks Apollo. “But he’s so… you know… *evil.*”

My first instinct is exactly the same as his. After all, I’d once been chosen as a sacrifice in Valerian’s honour, to appease an ancient bloodrite.

But then I remembered speaking to Hades about him.

Valerian wasn’t the one responsible for the initial uprising, and he’s oddly reasonable, but I doubt he likes being under Zera’s thumb. He’s likely looking for any excuse to break the truce.

“Hasn’t Valerian already allied with Zera?” says Hippolyta. “We’ve been fighting enough Unseelie.”

“They’re solitary,” I respond, remembering Hades questioning one of Zera’s scouts before this whole thing began. It had not occurred to me to mention it, because I assumed Zera had allied with Valerian secretly, but now...

Hippolyta frowns. “How do you know that?”

Any excuse to break the truce.

“Regardless of how she knows, what can we offer King Valerian?” Emetria questions. “Our argument was weak enough for Poseidon. The Unseelie crave violence and chaos. Zera can offer them that. We have nothing to bargain with.”

“Violence and chaos…” I mutter numbly.

I think of Hades’ words again. *The lesser of two evils.*

My mind is going places I don’t quite want it to, places the old Sephy wouldn’t have dreamed of. Dark, desperate places. I try to claw back some essence of the person I once was, the person I want to be again.

You don’t trade with people’s lives.

But if you do… pick them wisely.

“Daughter?” says my father.

“You’re looking kinda scary there,” Libby says at my elbow. “You’re not about to go on a murder spree, are you?”

“No,” I say. “Not me.”

Libby blinks. There’s an unnerved squeak in her voice.“Come again?”

“Dad,” I say, turning sharply towards him, “I need a report on the types of faeries in the Unseelie Court, and their particular, um… provocations. What they’d like to do if not curbed by Zera.”

If he’s surprised by that request, he doesn’t show it. “Give me a few hours,” he says, and sweeps off towards the library.

The others stare at me.

“You have a plan forming, Persephone?” asks Emetria.

“I think so,” I tell her. “It… it might be stupid. Maybe someone’s thought of it before—”

“We won’t know, until you tell us.”

“The Unseelie crave violence and bloodshed, yes?”

“Generally.”

“Then let’s give it to them.”

Silence settles over the room.

“They won’t choose killing Zera’s minions over killing us,” Artemis interjects. “It’s all the same to them. One faerie is much like another, and they’re likely to feel as Poseidon did. They are lovers of the natural world, too. Unless you’re going to let them harm humans…”

I smile, and just for once, imagine myself playing the role of the villain. I’m going to have to, just a little bit. Because people are going to die, and

I’m going to let it happen.

The lesser of two evils. The ends justify the means.

“Precisely,” I tell her, and fill the rest in on my plan.

Dad's report is prepared within the day, and I then begin the lengthy process of going over it and writing a speech to the Unseelie King himself. I want Emetria to deliver it, but she refuses.

"He'll think I'm lying!" I insist.

"I've had too many dealings with the Unseelie King. He's used to me twisting my words. And I have never suggested anything like this. It needs to be *you,* Sephy. Artemis will vouch for you."

The hunters have had an alliance of sorts with the Unseelie for aeons. A lot of them came from there initially, and will happily break bread with them on their travels. Artemis and a small group will go with me.

Emetria will not.

I feel a little like I'm drowning, that someone has tugged free the float I was using, and left me to fend for myself.

But something about remembering Hades' words makes me feel like he's beside me, like I'm taking him with me. I push his voice into mine, onto the ink scrawls of my speech.

This will work. It has to.

Artemis sends scouts to discern Valerian's whereabouts. When they find him, we'll need to act quickly, lest Zera find out where we're heading.

"Unseelies move about a lot," Artemis tells me. "He could be anywhere."

In the meantime, we train, and we wait. I find Dad in the library one morning with Diana propped beside him on a throne of books, making titan flashcards. He gives me a crash course in them while making origami dinosaurs for Diana, his fingers moving lightning-fast. He used to make me those when I was little, too.

"Now remember," he says, "titans—"

"Can't be killed by any known weapon, not even the celestial steel, I know."

"They can technically be injured," my father rattles on. "But they'll heal again almost immediately. According to legend, their severed limbs will

stitch back together—”

“Gross, Dad, there’s a kid present.”

“Look, a diplodocus!” says Diana in response, holding up one of her paper figures.

“Technically, that’s a brachiosaurus, but so close!” Dad beams. “Look at the nostril ridge—”

“Diplodocus.”

“I know it looks—”

“Diplodocus.”

Dad sighs. “Sure, yes, of course it is.” He shakes his head, turning back to me. “There’s an account from the first Athena that certain poisons were known to slow them; hence how they were able to defeat them the first time. I’ve compiled a list for Artemis, if you could get them to her?” He gestures to a thick piece of parchment at the end of the table, unable to move as Diana has grabbed hold of his hand and is crawling up his arm like a boney octopus.

“I’m enormous!” she declares. “ROAR!”

I take the list to Artemis in the armoury, whose eyes skim greedily over the list. “We can make most of these,” she says. “Peony—fetch these ingredients from the garden.”

“On it!”

She turns back to me as Peony scuttles off. “I was just coming to find you,” she says. “The scouts have returned. Valerian is currently at the Unseelie Court itself, a small realm within a forest somewhere in Ireland. You won’t even have to use your remaining day.”

Both fear and elation spin inside me as I dress quickly, in a gown far more like the ones I used to wear, dripping with butterflies and garnets, a cascade of dusk and autumn. I feel like me, but with a shred of some old, ancient power that comes from somewhere else entirely.

I wear bronze armguards painted with leaves, to complete the look. And I take my rapier. I am there to speak to him, but not to be dismissed. I want to look like the warrior queen.

“You look *so cool,*” says Libby, in a scarab-green tunic that makes her look even more like one of the hunters. “Seriously. I’m a little bit attracted to you right now.”

When we meet her in the corridor, Artemis is wearing a soft, sweeping gown of palest blue, her armour over it. “Ready?” she asks.

For the first time, I do not feel like I am lying when I say, “Yes.”

After the sharp, decadent wealth of the Undersea Court, I have no idea what to expect in the palace of the Unseelie. And yet, when we cross the threshold into their domain, I am flooded with a thousand different senses.

The building is constructed entirely of branches, woven into pillars and ceilings. Some are blooming, some are barren, and some are strung with glittering light, like fireflies. Parts of the roof are open entirely to a starlit sky. The floor is no more than dense, packed earth.

It's like I've wandered into a real, true fairy tale. It's perfect and primal, with streamers of spider's silk, colossal mushrooms, and bubbling brooks cutting through the floor. We pass a banquet table laden with blackberry wine in acorn cups, mead served in great horns, a roasted boar crammed with berries.

Unseelie gather around crackling hearths, sitting on logs, piping clear, fine music. Hades once told me that the Seelie were the pretty ones, and perhaps he was right, but I find beauty in the strange, unnatural faces and twisted features. No one here is glamoured, and every part of them is different from their neighbours. They have parsnip noses, yellow eyes, horns and antlers and tails and claws. They sit among wolves and deer, tame as puppies, and moths colour the air.

There's something in it, something between dust and glitter. An old, fine magic, as ancient as the earth. I've never seen a place of so few colours appear so vibrant. Though everything is brown or green or mushroom, there's a thousand shades in between; emerald, viridian, scarab, oyster, moth, dove.

I'm infinitely aware that Hades must have come here before, that he's modelled at least part of the gardens on the wildness of this forest.

And I'm a little less afraid, because I feel like I know what he would say.

At the end of the cavern of trees sits Valerian atop a throne of thorns and vines, his long, hoofed feet stretched out before him. He wears a crown of golden oak leaves, with strands twisting up his antlers.

"Oh, I remember that dude," Libby whispers into my ear, as if she's only just realised. "Didn't he try to sacrifice you?"

Everything about that night seems a long, long time ago. I wonder if Valerian will remember me, and if I want him to.

Valerian smiles as we approach, and we all bow our heads.

"Welcome, Lady of Night," he says. "Although I hear it is 'queen' now. I've heard quite the tale about you."

"We've all heard tales, King Valerian," I respond, in what I hope is a neutral tone.

"It is brave of you to visit my court," he continues, "without a proper invitation. And so few in number."

A few of his knights creep closer, as if readying to pounce. Artemis tenses beside me.

"I am confident of our odds," I return, half feeling it. The Unseelie are numerous, but they're mostly smaller and not as powerful.

"Are you indeed?" He leans forward in his throne, the vines tightening beneath him, coiling like serpents. "Would you care to test that?"

"Not particularly, no."

At this, he barks a laugh. "You've got some humour, girl. I'm glad we didn't sacrifice you."

So he does remember me. I wonder if that works in my favour or not.

"Lord Hades had a sense of humour, too," Valerian continues. "I liked him."

I force down the lump in my throat. "I'm sure he'll regale you with more of his wit when he is returned to us."

He raises an eyebrow. "Surely he's dead?"

"I do not believe so."

At this, he can only frown. "Speak your piece, Queen of Hell. Let us dally no longer."

I'm about to do just that, when I notice a face in the crowd that makes my blood run cold.

For one awful, sliver of a second, I think it's Hades. That hope dissipates before it's had too much time to blossom. It isn't him. Of course it isn't. But there's the same sharpness of features, a similar head of lustrous crow-black hair… accompanied by a hard sneer I'd long since forgotten Hades ever wearing.

Ares. Ares is here. And by his side, decked in midnight and silver, is Dione.

My eyes flit towards Artemis, and she follows my gaze, stiffening. Valerian notices it too.

“Ah, yes, you are not the only guests at our court tonight,” he says.

I stare at Ares, trying to work out what he’s doing here, if he’s already secured Valerian’s support, if we’re all in terrible danger, but his expression is cold and remote. I cannot read it.

“I should prefer a private audience with Your Majesty,” I say.

Valerian sighs, rising from his seat. “Very well.”

We’re escorted by a dozen guards to a small room away from the main chamber. Valerian reclines on a massive bed, woven from the branches. He props himself up on a mountain of pillows, pixies attending him with goblets of wine and sugared dates.

“Say what you came to say, then, and be quick about it,” he instructs, picking a plump date from a plate. “Before I grow bored of you.”

“Very well,” I say, hoping I’m not trembling, “I want you to join us in our fight against Zera.”

There’s a long pause, before he erupts into loud peals of laughter. “You...cannot be serious.” Valerian wipes a tear from his eye. “Go against Zera? And her power? We’ll be wiped off the map.”

“Her forces are dwindling,” I insist. “And I am confident that together, we can overthrow her.”

“Your confidence is astounding,” he says. “I’ll be the first to admit I’ve no love for the woman, but I do have a terrific love of *life.* In fact, it’s tempting to take you all prisoner right now and bask in the rewards she’ll bestow upon me when I hand you over. What could you—a mere trifling of a girl—offer *me?*”

I take a deep breath, trying not to think too hard about the consequences of my next words, or how easy it would be for him to hand us straight over to Zera and be done with us. “Power,” I say. “The sort that Zera will never give to you.”

His gaze narrows, and he runs a hand under his furred chin. “I’m listening.”

“Your people desire bloodshed, the freedom to hunt and trick and deceive humanity. Things you will never experience in the same way if Zera all but destroys them. But if you ally with us, I will *let you* do just that. Within reason, of course.”

He raises an eyebrow, but I have his attention. I try to focus on that, and not the dozens of other gazes fixed on me, or the whispering, quiet murmurs.

“Within reason?”

“You can’t hurt innocents,” I continue. “No stolen babes or virgin sacrifices. But I’m sure you care about the natural world. Take vengeance on those that destroy it. Steal into the homes of billionaires destroying it for their own gain. Riddle them with nightmares. Haunt them. Hurt them. Zera wants to return to the old ways? I give some of those old ways to you. I’m inviting you to play god.”

He pauses for a moment, the room silent.

“You would free us from the Samhain oath? Give us unchecked power? Allow *us* to decide who we hunt?”

“Ideally, we would form a council of Seelie and Unseelie alike, and discuss in a civil manner who we would deem worthy of death, but if you do not wish to do that, you do not have to. I will give you unchecked power. Someone else may stop you if they believe you’ve gone too far, but not me.”

He regards me carefully, and I wonder if he can hear the thump of my chest. “You can lie, can’t you?” he says. “You are part mortal.”

“We shall vouch for her,” says Artemis, stepping forward. “As will any faerie.”

“If I am lying,” I continue, “then you can count me as your first victim.”

“I thought you were confident in your ability to protect yourself?”

I kneel down before him, the hard ground digging into my knees. “I know it is hard to trust a mortal, with our tongues so inclined towards untruths, but I swear to you, although I *can* lie, I am no liar. I do not break my oaths.”

Valerian looks at me for a long, steady moment, before his gaze goes to Artemis. “Is that true, My Lady? Have you ever known her to lie?”

“My queen only lies when she says that she is fine,” she replies. “And who among us would not utter that lie, if we could?”

At this, Valerian smiles. “All right, young majesty. You will have our support. We will join you in your fight against Zera. It is a brave new world you herald.”

My heart thumps with relief and panic, perfectly uneven. I want to discuss the finer points with him, if he’ll allow a council, if he’ll consent to moderation, but I don’t want to risk the fragile stitches coming apart.

Artemis steps up to my side, and I realise I’m still on the ground. I rise.

“I shall discuss the finer points with you, Your Majesty,” says Artemis to Valerian, “but hopefully over a good deal of wine.”

He barks with laughter. “Indeed, good lady!” He claps his hands. “Let us resume the revel! For tomorrow we go to war.”

And I go to Hades.

The relief floats over me, not solid enough to be grasped at. I actually think I might be sick.

I can’t believe what we’ve just done, what we’ve accomplished.

We re-enter the main room, trying to keep our faces placid, to betray none of what has just transpired, in case Ares sees it. Valerian’s allying with us will hardly be a secret soon, but no one is keen to confront him.

“We’ll get him so drunk he’ll forget why he came here,” says Valerian, reading my searching eyes. “Have no fear.”

The music strikes up again, loud and rousing. Libby seizes my hands and drags me onto the dancefloor, seizing a couple of acorn cups from a pixie handing them out.

“Wait,” she says, as the pixie floats away, “is this safe for mortals?”

The pixie grins. “Depends on how much you have.”

Libby stares at the thimble full of liquid. “I’m going to risk it,” she says, and promptly necks it back.

I do the same with my own. It’s a sweet, dark, burning liquid. It slithers down to my bones.

I like this, I realise. I like this drink, this place, Faerie in general. When the veneer of fear is pulled away, I like this world.

But it’s intense and bright and far too much. I’m not sure it can be mine all of the time, not even with Hades beside me.

Although he never much cared for the parties.

Libby grabs my arms and twirls me. “That was insane.”

“It was.”

“But we have our allies.”

“We do.”

She offers me a nervous, radiant smile. “You did it.”

“Now we just have to hope that Valerian doesn’t go on a murdering rampage if we manage to defeat Zera.”

“*When* we defeat Zera.”

I look at her incredulously.

“Benefits of being able to lie, girl. Optimism!”

She twirls further into the throng. I battle through the quivering bodies towards her, but a pale, furious face cuts between us.

“What have you done with Aphron?” Dione demands, her aqua eye blazing.

“I assure you, they are not hurt.”

“Liar,” she hisses, “dirty, filthy, mortal liar! I could kill you, you know. Right now.”

“A falling piano could kill me,” I tell her, with more confidence than I’m sure of. “So could an overzealous bird or a piece of raw chicken. Don’t give yourself too much credit, Dione,” I hiss. For added effect, I summon flames to my fingertips. “And just so you remember… I’m not mortal anymore.”

Her eyes narrow, but before she can say anything else, a hand slides round my waist and Ares pulls me into his arms. “Now, Dione, you ought to show the young queen a little more respect.” His lips twist into a smile. “Why don’t you go and find her something to drink?”

Dione glares, but she marches off. If she returns with something for me, I’ll refuse to drink it. I’d be a very valuable hostage.

Then again, so would Ares. His mother seems to care about him, at least, in the way one cares about money, an expensive self-portrait. He’s her legacy, a reflection of her hopes and dreams. Maybe I should take *him* prisoner.

I glance for Artemis, but she’s locked in discussion with Valerian. I have little choice but to dance and make nice.

His hands feel like blades against my back, the music stilted by his proximity. “What did you and Valerian discuss?” Ares asks, skipping straight to the point.

“I won’t tell you.”

He snorts at this, but then his expression darkens. “My brother,” he says. “Do you think he’s still alive?”

“Why?” I ask innocently. “Would you help me get him back if he was?”

At this, Ares says nothing.

“Why pretend you care? Your mother—”

“Went too far, yes. There were other ways to open the gate.”

My heart feels like lead. “He would never have opened it.”

“He just didn’t understand—”

“Genocide? You’re right. And he never would.”

“Everyone changes their minds eventually, Sephy. When they live as long as we do.”

“Don’t call me that.”

“It’s your name, isn’t it?”

“My name is Persephone, Zeron, but you may call me Your Majesty.”

He laughs. “You’re a child.”

“You’re a murderer.”

“So’s my brother, and you seem rather fond of him.”

Anger twitches inside me. “He is nothing like you.”

“No, but I did my best to rectify that.”

An old memory, of a jeering Ares towering over a tiny Hades sparks through me, my fury flaring along with it. I shove Ares away from me. “Stay away from him.”

“Not hard at the moment, is it?”

I pause, fear and fury tight inside every crevice of my chest. I don’t know whether I want to hit him or flee.

“Does it kill you, knowing that he’s down there?” Ares continues. “Knowing you could get him back any time if only you were prepared to risk __”

“The entire mortal world?”

Ares studies me for a long moment. I cannot read his expression, but it’s as sharp as an arrow. “Get him out,” he says darkly. “Convince him to ally with Mother. He’ll listen to you. I can protect you both from her wrath. Her new world could be a magnificent one if you both live to see it.”

There is a moment, a fraction of a moment, when I consider it. Because I am getting to that point where I would sacrifice anything, commit any evil, just to have him home and safe. And if we live forever? Maybe there will come a time when the cost doesn’t kill me.

Maybe.

I think now I’m just lying to myself.

“You won’t get a better offer,” says Ares, and vanishes into the crowd, unaware that I *have* a better offer… even if the results aren’t as guaranteed.

Libby finds me again, offering me a horn full of spiced wine. I down almost the entire thing and hurl it at the floor like the chaotic faerie queen I could be. For a short, stolen moment, I pretend I’m that person, the one who cares about nothing. I revel in what we’ve accomplished tonight and drink and dance enough to suspend my fears, and Ares’ words.

I eat, too, stuffing my face with birds on beds of barley, fat with crackling skin. I summon fire on command and let a group of imps try to teach me how to juggle. I fly with the pixies. I pass from game to game and person to person, hoping Artemis is prepared to be the sensible one, to stop

me if anything goes too far, because right now I want to dissolve. I want to surrender my thoughts to someone else.

One of the pixies I'm dancing with has the tattoo of a merman on her arm. It's a beautiful image, half real, half brushstroke. It looks familiar, like I recognise the work.

It's similar to the wings on Luliver's back.

"Where did you get that?" I ask her.

She points to a woman by the side of the hall, dark-skinned and long-limbed. She looks almost like one of the high fae, but she has ears that end in furry points and the tawny golden eyes of an owl. Almost every bare inch of her skin is covered with beautiful, dark markings.

"Talla," the pixie says. "She's great!"

I thank her, slipping away from the throng of dancers, and head to Talla's side. She gives a half-bow as I approach, clearly not awed. "All hail the mighty Queen of Hell."

"You're Talla?" I ask. "The tattooist?"

"I am many things, that included. Does my reputation precede me?"

"Did you ever do one for the previous Lord Hades?"

She smiles. "Those magnificent wings? Yes, those were mine. Don't know why he'd need them with a pair of his own, but I was honoured to give them."

I frown, because how could she possibly have failed to have noticed the wounds his mother inflicted?

But it occurred to me he could have glamoured them away, long enough for her to paint over them.

I wonder who else has ever seen them, why, even in the early days, he'd shown them to me.

I swallow hard. *You know why.*

"They were exquisite," I agree.

"Want a set of your own?"

Sephy of half a year ago would have panicked at the very idea, having nothing against them, but would have freaked at the permanence, been indecisive over the design, fretted about what her father would think.

But I admit I find it more tempting now. I already have one on my wrist, and I can glamour it away if I change my mind, although I doubt I will. I want something permanent, something mine. A choice on my body I've made for myself.

"How long would it take?"

“Depends what you want.”

“A ring of flowers, thorns and feathers,” I say. “About the size of my fist. On my shoulder.”

She grins. “’Bout thirty minutes. That suit?”

“Sure.”

She leads me away to an alcove and sits me down, glamouring a design onto her own skin first. “Look all right?”

“Perfect.”

My back is already bare, there’s no need for me to undress. Talla applies something cool to my flesh, and something hovers there; the image, perhaps, that she intends to trace. She pulls out a long, golden needle and presses it to my flesh. It’s a bizarre feeling, less like a sharpness and more like a bread knife.

“Hades told me you were a half fae,” I say, dispelling the quiet between the two of us. The room is still buzzing.

“He is correct.”

“I thought half fae were forbidden?”

“King Valerian isn’t so strict.”

It’s a nice thing to hear, after just promising him violence. Maybe he’s a reasonable person, the sort who can bring something more to this re-forged alliance.

“What was it like, growing up half fae?” I ask Talla. She’s the first I’ve ever met outside of myself.

“A lot like growing up a full fae, I imagine. I wasn’t raised by my mortal parent, although I spent some time amongst the mortals in my youth. Ran a tattoo studio in New York.”

I frown, as she looks only a few years older than me. Not old enough to have done so much. “How old are you?”

“Fifty-two.”

I blink, tensing with surprise.

“I know, look good for my age, right?”

“Do you… do you know how long you’ll live for?”

At this, she shrugs. “No clue. There’s been other half fae here. One lasted about one hundred and fifty years, another three hundred… one only eighty but he died after a drunken bet gone very, very wrong. Hard to say how long I’ll have. But then, I’m not one of the high fae. Goblins and ghouls don’t live forever, you know.” She pauses. “Word is, you used to be mortal, or close enough to it.”

“That is correct.”

“You don’t look it now.”

“I don’t really feel it, any more.” *Or anything else.*

I never wanted to live forever. I still don’t. But I also really, really don’t like the thought of rescuing Luliver only to leave him a few decades later. I’m not sure he could take it.

Sephy of last year would have thought it was ridiculous to feel that way about anyone, to be so sure I’d found a person I could spend literal *eternity* with. But what did she know? And I knew *him,* the shape of his soul, the curve of his heart. And I knew I was fixed to it irreparably, and he to mine.

If we saved him—*when* I saved him, I was going to make sure he understood.

“He spoke about you, you know,” says Talla softly, as if some part of her can read my thoughts.

I bristle beneath her blade. “He did?”

“Took a while to do wings like that. Got pretty drunk. Kinda cagey with the details, guess he had to be. But he spoke of this girl he knew, had known most of her life. Told me she was mortal and he’d met her over and over, but she never remembered him. He wondered if he could be in love with someone when he could still count the times they’d spoken, be in love with someone who would never remember his name.”

“Oh.”

“I concluded yes, by the way.” She sighs. “It sounded like the makings of a pretty epic love story.”

“It was,” I say, fighting the press of tears.

“I hope it has a decent end.”

My throat hurts too much to say, ‘me too.’

We stumble back at dawn with two dozen warriors and promises of more to follow. Libby sobers up on the boat ride back, at least enough to talk coherently.

"So, let me get this straight," she says, "you got drunk, partied all night long, and got a *freaking tattoo?*"

"I mean, I also brokered peace with the Unseelie Court and struck a deal which could have huge ramifications for the future of the entire world, but sure, let's focus on that."

"Your dad is going to flip."

"My dad," I say, brushing a hand over my shoulder and glamouring away the design, "never needs to know."

"Sneaky." Libby grins. "Next time you find a magical tattoo artist, let me know."

"Oh, what would you get?"

Libby's eyes glance towards Artemis, standing at the prow of the boat, not listening.

"An arrow," she says under her breath, her gaze unwavering.

I find myself smiling."Did anything happen between you two at the party?"

"No, not really. I mean, we talked. We talked a lot. But I was pretty wasted, so…"

"She didn't take advantage of you?"

Libby sighs, leaning back in her seat. "If only."

We arrive back at the gates and disembark. Emetria rushes out to greet us, seeing the small fleet of warriors behind us. Her eyes go wide.

"You did it," she says. "You actually did it."

Exhausted as I am, it's hard to repress my grin. "I did."

The tears flow freely down her face, and mine come pretty fast afterwards.

When I wake, our halls are once more filled with people, and the Unseelie have set up tents on the banks beside the Styx, unperturbed by the wailing.

"We've seen worse in the forests," says one. "Little screaming? Reminds us of home!"

I suppress my shudder, praying the cackling that follows means they're at least exaggerating.

Artemis finds me after breakfast, dressed for a journey, covered in pouches and weapons.

"Are you going somewhere?" I ask her.

She smiles. "Tartarus," she says. "You coming?"

I freeze momentarily. "You're serious?"

"You got something else to do?"

I knew we'd be leaving soon, I just hadn't considered *how* soon, and yet… here it is.

Emetria stands in the corridor. "I've packed you a bag," she says.

"I'll… I'll go get dressed."

I head back to my room and shake Libby awake. She moans and slides off to the bathroom while I raid my closet. I dress carefully, both for travelling and for battle, keeping my armour lightweight. I refuse my crown, but I dress in bronze and green; it never hurts to look powerful.

Libby, when she comes out of the bathroom, follows my lead, although her clothes are more muted. She's almost a mirror of Artemis when they meet in the corridor, forest brown and dove grey. The huntress hands Libby a battery-operated torch. "It may be dark below," she says. "I hear mortal eyes are less than receptive."

Libby tries not to smile at the gesture, and tucks it into her belt.

Apollo is dressed like an ancient greek warrior; short tunic, breast plate, sandals. He's in white and gold, as radiant as ever. Artemis criticises his footwear.

The dogs are coming with us. They could be vital to finding Hades. I'm not sure if it's a scent or something more, but they've been able to find him before.

The final member of our party is Peony. Two mortals, three reigning deities.

Against a family of titans.

"Trust in the Oracle's words," Emetria insists, reading something in my face as she hands me my pack and straps me into it. Artemis helps Libby with hers.

My father meets me at the door. "You warm enough?"

I smile faintly. "Plenty warm, Dad."

"Got enough food?"

"I assume so?"

"Right." He pauses. "I hate this."

"I know."

We hug anyway, and say nothing else. For a moment, in his arms, I feel like I understand exactly how he feels, the wretched powerlessness and fear. He wants to yell and scream and keep me here, to lock me in some tower away from the world. But he won't or can't, either because he's too good or he knows I'd break free. I have to go. If he doesn't let me, I'll hate him for it.

Emetria and a small armed escort come with us. She's silent almost the entire way, her face grey and taut. Finally, we reach the Gate. Her face speaks of a thousand untold thoughts, the same bitter powerlessness I felt in Dad's embrace. She looks like she could choke on it.

There's other things, too. More she hasn't said.

"What is it?" I ask her.

"I'm just thinking about our earlier conversation, about what Luliver would have wanted." I prepare myself for a speech about how he would never have wanted me to risk my life, but it doesn't come. "If anyone had ever asked him what he wanted, he would have said you. He would never have asked for anything more. You're the only thing in this world he's ever really loved. And the only thing that's ever loved him back."

I think of his words, when I asked him what he wanted once, how he skirted round the answer. *There are many things I want that I shall never have.*

Me. He wanted *me.* And he was certain it would never happen, that I would never return his affections. My heart feels raw and heavy, like an anvil is resting on top of a wound.

"Except you," I tell her. "You love him too."

"Yes," she says. "But I don't think he knows that."

I'm not sure he knows that I love him, either.

But he will. I swear it.

Emetria fiddles with my hair, stroking back a loose curl, faffing, delaying. “If… if you find him, but you can’t get out, if something goes wrong, but you manage to get to him… please let him know how much I love him. Don’t let him spend another moment not knowing. Don’t—”

Don’t let him die. But if there’s nothing you can do, let him know.

“I will,” I tell her.

“And you. I love you, too.”

I think it’s the first time she’s said it without a door between us, or without me being mad at her. “I know, Mama,” I say, trying the word on for size. It feels rusty and strange, a little silly. “And…”

“Yes?”

“I’m going to find him. And we’re both coming home.”

“I’ve never been so glad that you can lie.”

She hugs me, long and fierce, and tells me to take care.

I open the Gate, the juddering earth beneath our feet now horrible in its familiarity. The ground shatters like pie crust. Our escort keeps us tightly guarded in case Zera should launch an attack. We don’t know what Ares learnt last night, what he could have told her. It’s one of the reasons we need to act now.

Apollo flies down first with Artemis, and I take the dogs down before we both fly up for Libby and Peony. Their eyes flit around the barren wasteland, soaking up the silent gloom. Above us, the seal rumbles like a storm, fractured light splitting through the clouds.

I close it behind us, summoning my rapier back to my grip, and the skies seem to shake with a reverberating thud.

Libby pulls up her scarf to guard against the dust in the air. The air seems grainy with greyness, sandpaper-rough. “I’m not sure what I was expecting,” she says, “but it wasn’t this.”

Artemis shrugs, taking the rope from her belt. “Let’s set this up, and quickly too.”

We find a patch of flat ground beneath a tree and lay out one of the pieces, pinning it in place with rocks and covering it with branches and foliage.

“We shouldn’t wait around,” Artemis advises. “If I was a titan and saw that the gate was open, even for a brief amount of time…”

I cast my eyes down, thinking of the lost hunters, wondering if it was my fault, and if I was foolish to come myself. The dogs seem to sense my emotions. Hurricane nudges the back of my hand.

“It’s all right,” I tell them. “Do you know where you’re going?”

There should be no trace of Hades left, and certainly there was nothing left of his scent in the palace, but I’m trusting that there’s some else they can trace, something stronger than smell.

Fluffy licks my hand, and they bound off towards the edge of the valley.

A stormcloud rolls overhead.

“The air feels strange here,” Apollo remarks. “Heavier.”

“I concur,” says Artemis.

I’m not sure I feel it, and Libby and Peony report nothing either. We continue on our way, the great slap of grey plains rising to greet us. I can see nothing for miles. Why would he have gone this way?

Apollo must be having a similar thought, because a second later he shucks out his wings and takes to the skies, looping over the valley.

“Apollo?” Artemis calls. “What do you see?”

“Nothing,” he reports. “I see—”

The storm cracks behind him, and something shoots through the cloud, striking him in the wing. He crashes to the floor, coughing up dust.

“Tristan!” Artemis screams, running to cover him. She rips out her bow, firing into the storm clouds as a rain of ice bolts comes streaming towards us. Cold steams the air.

I summon my own wings and fling them over Peony and Libby, feeling two sharp points strike my muscles just above the wing joint. I don’t know how bad it is, and I can’t check.

“Run!” I hiss.

Peony and Libby haul Apollo to his feet, Atremis covering us as we sprint for shelter. The dogs charge ahead, a dark tunnel emerging in the foot of the hills.

Libby and Peony have noticed it too, and drag Apollo towards it.

I cannot see our enemy in the clouds, and I’m not sure I can fly, or if it’s wise to. I keep my eyes fixed on the mouth of the tunnel and don’t stop running until we’ve dropped into its depths.

The firing stops, and all goes quiet. Either our enemy can’t reach us here, or…

Or this is where they wanted us to go.

We’re in a dark underground corridor. There’s faint light ahead, bluish crystals etched into the rock. I can’t see much more, not even when Libby flicks on her torch.

“Everyone OK?” I ask.

“I fell, like, a hundred feet,” Apollo groans.

“Doesn’t answer my question though, does it?”

Peony and Artemis prop him up against a wall and start examining him for injuries, yanking the bolt from his wings. He lets out a low hiss, the ice dissolving in their hands.

“I got hit,” I tell Libby, the pain only just registering. “Can you—”

She pulls them out before I can think, my wings shuddering to the floor. Artemis passes vials of healing liquid, which Libby splashes liberally against my injuries. I grit my teeth through the steaming.

“A couple of broken ribs,” Artemis deduces, doctoring her brother. “They’ll sting, but they shouldn’t stop you. You got off lightly.”

“I don’t *feel* like I got off lightly—”

I crouch beside him and press my hand against his chest. Warmth emanates from my fingers as I envision the cracks in the bone knitting back together. My own energy trickles away, and I start to sag. Apollo jerks backwards, not fully healed.

“Don’t expend all your energy,” he warns. “You’re wounded too. I’ll be better after rest, we all will.”

“Take five,” Artemis snaps. “We can’t stay here long.”

“Where even *are* we?” says Peony. She picks up Libby’s torch and flashes it down the corridor. Finally adjusted, my eyes make out a few passageways.

I take the torch and head on to double check. They’re endless; dozens of long, dark passageways slicing under the hill.

I have seen this place before, in books, in films. But this is something else. A darker, deadlier version than the one that lay beneath Thebes.

“Oh no…” I whisper.

“What is it?” asks Artemis.

“It’s a labyrinth.”

A pause stretches between us, the kind of silence that echoes.

“Great,” says Libby eventually. “Anyone bring any string?”

Rope will not last long. I consider going out and seeing if there’s a way around, investigating our surroundings, but I remember that dense, dark plain, the nothingness of this place.

If Hades is here, he’s in the labyrinth. I think everything is.

I sit down in the dark, pluck out my dagger, and start taking apart my skirt.

“What are you doing?” asks Artemis.

“Getting us some thread.” I pull a small portion free. “Just call me Ariadne!”

Apollo blinks, groggy with the pain and whatever his sister has plied him with. “Who’s she?”

I turn to him incredulously. “You’re kidding, right?”

He shakes his head.

“Theseus and the Minotaur? Labyrinth? Princess of Thebes?”

“I’ve heard of Thebes!” he says triumphantly. “And I’ve fought Minotaurs.”

“You… you don’t know the story?”

“Should I?”

“It’s your history!”

“You never dozed through history class before?”

“No!”

Artemis sighs wearily.

“Do *you* know it?” he demands.

“Better than you!”

It takes a long time to unravel my skirt, and I’m not sure how far it’ll take us. We doctor our wounds and refresh ourselves as best we can.

“Can you fold your wings away yet?” Artemis asks Apollo.

“No. They’re still too stiff. Not healing properly.”

Artemis’ face goes white. Without another word, she plucks one of the feathers around his wounds and licks it. She sighs in relief, her body sagging. “Not poisoned,” she deduces.

He touches his ribs. “I still don’t feel great. Sephy?”

I wiggle my wings, and suck them back in. They feel odd, like I can still feel them under the surface. I’m starting to understand what they mean by the heavier air.

“A dampener,” Artemis deduces, “softening our powers.”

“Yours, and the Titans’,” Peony adds. “Makes sense. If you can’t kill them, you need to at least delay them.”

“How come it’s not affecting Sephy as much?” Apollo asks, wincing as he tests his side.

“Her being half-mortal… it might be taking longer. She’s already got a kind of natural dampener. No offense.”

“Some taken.” I tie one end of my thread to a nearby sconce. “Are we ready?”

They nod.

We shuffle our bags back on, Artemis taking Apollo's, and continue down the corridor, following the dogs' lead. I hope the string is redundant, that we don't need to rely on it at all, but a few times the dogs race up and down, as if they can't work out which way Hades went.

I imagine him down here, alone, going back and forth. I look at Apollo, struggling with only minor wounds, and remember how badly Hades was hurt when he fell. How had he walked away from that, alone with no one to help him?

My stomach twists in knots, my mind going places I wish it wouldn't.

Something scuttles in the distance.

"What was that?" Libby gasps.

"Hmm, shall we take bets?" says Peony. "Minotaur? Sphinx? Manticore?"

"I thought I liked you," says Libby tonelessly. "I could change my mind. But my money's on flesh-eating dryads, warped by an eternity in hell."

"Ooh, good choice!"

"Those would be louder," Artemis interrupts, drawing her weapon, "stay alert."

"Because I was feeling *so* relaxed," adds Libby, which somehow makes Artemis smile.

She sobers up quickly, and we all follow her example. The dogs growl, grinding to a stop. Their gazes go upwards.

"What is it, boys?" I ask. "There's nothing up there."

Their fur sharpens into fine points, their growls sliding into barks.

Libby angles her torch upwards.

The light falls first on eight beetle-black eyes, each the size of pebbles. It takes a moment for the legs to swing into view, for all eight, each longer than my forearm, to become apparent.

It's a giant spider.

I've spent years rescuing dad from spiders, never having been perturbed by them myself, but I tremble under the weight of this. The air between us shortens and stiffens.

Maybe it won't attack. Maybe it's just like your normal, average house spider.

Just much, much larger.

Maybe we can just creep by it—

But before any of us can move, it launches itself at Peony. She slices off two of its legs with her knife, Artemis striking its massive body with her arrows. It's not enough. The sound of scuttling emanates along the endless corridor, and before long it is filled with writhing arachnids.

"Get down!" I shout. I pour power into my palms, as easily as water from a tap, although I feel a little of my energy being sucked away as the fire collects in my fists.

I fill the space with fire.

Bodies start dropping from the ceiling, spasming and wriggling. We charge through the flaming limbs, cutting them down. The air is thick with smoke, hairy legs, flashes of black eyes.

Libby lets out a scream, falling to her feet, one clamped to her spine. Artemis fires an arrow and sprints towards her, kicking the spider away and dragging her to her feet. Another rises behind her shoulder, but Libby tosses her dagger and strikes it clean in the back. She yanks it free and hurtles after us, leaving Artemis reeling.

The corridor branches at the end, and we turn in the direction they aren't coming from, not caring if we're going the wrong way. I let the others charge ahead of me and turn back, letting out a huge plume of fire. A horrible, scratching, hissing sound fills the air.

I remember Hades once pulling down a wall of rock as if it were no harder than a curtain. I have no idea if he was only able to do that in the Underworld, where his powers were strongest, but try not to fixate on it. I seize the wall and yank it, imagining it to be no more than putty. Stone trembles through the air, cutting off our path. I've lost the thread—of course I have—but the enemy is barred.

"Don't stop," I tell the others. "I'm not sure how much longer that will last."

For hours, we traipse onwards through the darkness, though the endless corridors of black stone, time and energy dribbling away from us. We come across nothing else, although the walls are rarely silent. Things scuttle and hiss and moan in the dark.

It makes me miss the Styx.

Eventually, we come across a small chamber with an underground river, damp and dark, stuffed with strange, blue-green light. It's dim and cold, but deciding we'll not find anything better, and on the brink of collapse, we make camp. I pull down another wall to block us in, hoping I'll be able to remove it.

We clean our wounds and build a small fire. It's cold, and we packed light, bringing little in the way of blankets. We strip off the armour we dare, keep our weapons close, and dine on hard biscuits and strips of dried meat. For a long while, we are very quiet.

Finally, after too long spent sitting in silence Libby, starts to tap out a beat on her flask, and sings along to it. A silly old pop song, the sort we used to dance to as kids.

"You have a nice voice," Artemis remarks.

"It's better than Sephy's."

I narrow my eyes. "Thanks, Libs."

"You're welcome!" She shoots me a grin. "It's too doom and gloom here. Shall we play a game? I spy with my little eye, something beginning with R—"

"Rock."

She pouts. "Well, you're no fun."

Artemis smiles, rolling out her arrows to sort them, dipping three of the black ones in a small flask. Apollo grabs it when she's not looking and gives it a sniff.

"What's this?"

Artemis yanks it back. "Careful! That's Deathbringer. One of the deadliest poisons in the world."

"It smells nice."

Artemis groans, rolling her eyes. "How, *how* are we related? Did I suck all the sense out of you in the womb?"

"Maybe I sucked all the good looks."

"Ha, no!" interjects Libby, and then goes very quiet when we all turn to stare at her.

"How about we share our hopes and dreams for a warless future?" Peony suggests. "I've got a long list of things I'm going to do when this is all over—"

"All right, red shirt," says Libby, "that's enough from you. Artemis?"

"Why does she call me 'red shirt'?" Peony says, half to herself. "I am wearing grey…"

Artemis blinks. “You want me to pick a game?”

“I want you to say something.”

“Like… what?”

“I don’t know. A joke. A funny story about your past?”

“Artemis doesn’t do funny,” says Apollo blearily.

“It’s because you suck the humour out of a room,” Artemis snaps.

“I stand corrected.” He thinks for a moment. “What about that time you accidentally stapled your fingers together, twice?”

“That was you, you fool.”

“Was it? My memory isn’t what it used to be…”

Peony and Libby both laugh. I manage half a snort, too.

“I miss my siblings,” says Peony, rather suddenly. “I had two older brothers, and a younger sister. I didn’t care for my parents much, but my siblings and I… we were close, once. I couldn’t keep in contact with them after I joined the hunters, but I kept an eye on them for decades. I wish I could have been part of their lives for longer.” She pauses, and eventually her gaze circles round to me. “You’re queen of the Underworld, Sephy. Do you think I’ll see them again?”

“I think you shouldn’t be in such a rush,” I say swiftly, which gets a round of weak laughter.

“My brothers are assholes,” Libby follows on. “But, sure, yeah, I miss them too. I might be nice to them for a whole week when I go home.”

“I don’t miss my brother,” Artemis quips.

“I am *right here.*”

“And you said I couldn’t be funny…”

He punches her on the arm. “You like me really.”

“Since I cannot lie, I will not answer,” she says, but she’s grinning. She hands him her last strip of beef, and they knock elbows.

I wish I’d had a sibling. Even if either of my parents ever had another, which I suppose they still could, it wouldn’t be the same now. You need to grow up with them.

I lean back against the dogs, curling my fingers into their fur. Kerby offers me a lick. Low laughter passes around the cavern, faces lit up by firelight.

I fixate on that, hugging my mark, and try to sleep.

I wake in the dark. No, not quite the dark, the grey. There's a thick fog all around me, and everything else is blackness. I want to call out to the others, but I know they're not here. I'm not even sure I am.

Am I dreaming?

Something glitters in the haze, like a thin thread. It falls against my chest, tugging my heartstrings, pulling me closer.

I hear someone moan in the distance.

Hades.

I rush his name, and race into the fog. "Hades! *Luliver*! where are you?"

He does not call back, but slowly, the darkness recedes. I see him ahead of me shackled to a wall, kneeling on the floor, his shirt hanging off him in shreds. He's bloodied and bruised, his face streaked with dirt. His wings are extended above him, silvery shafts glinting in the murky light.

My stomach heaves. The shafts go through his feathers and flesh. They've pinned him to a wall.

A dream, a dream, it's only a dream.

But on the off-chance that it's not, my hands go to his chains. There's a nothingness to my fingers; I can't feel anything beneath them, and I can't undo the manacles. My powers aren't working. My body is barely mine.

I seize Hades' face, crouching beside him. He murmurs beneath my touch.

"Luliver..." I stroke the contours of his face, his split eyebrow, his chapped lips. "Luliver, can you hear me?"

"Persephone..." His voice is rough as sandpaper, unused or overused, I can't tell.

I lean against his forehead. "I'm here."

"Is this the good dream or the bad one?"

"For me?" I say. "Bad. Very bad."

"It's good… to see you…"

“I’m coming to get you,” I whisper into his ear. “We’re close, we’re so close…”

He blinks up at me, the colour clean sucked out of his eyes, like hardened honey left too long in the cupboard. He frowns, in as much as his bloodied face will let him. “You look different.”

Tears sting my eyes as his own pass over my sharp features, my plain cheeks, the pointed peaks of my ears. He inches back. “You’ve changed.”

There’s something in his voice, a hollowness, a disappointment. My chest tightens. “I have,” I tell him, “I have, and I’m strong enough to save you now—”

He jerks his head away, his gold eyes burning. “You’re actually here.”

“Yes, yes of course—”

“No,” he says, jerking away from me. “You can’t come. You have to go. If they find you—”

“I’m not leaving without you!”

“No one ever leaves,” he says. “She won’t let us leave…”

“She?”

I take him again in my arms. I can’t feel him. I can’t feel anything. But there’s a moment when I imagine I can. He shakes beneath me, trembling. My heart feels everything my body can’t, a grater to my bones.

“I miss you,” he says, his voice brittle. “I’m sorry. For everything I ever did or didn’t do—”

“You have *nothing* to be sorry for,” I insist, my voice breaking. “Do you hear? *Nothing.* I’m the one who should be sorry.”

“Maybe… maybe I am imagining you, after all…”

“You’re not! I’m coming to get you!”

“If you ever loved me, you wouldn’t.”

“I *do* love you!”

He smiles weakly. “Now I know I’m imagining you.” He leans against my shoulder. “But at least you’ll be safe.”

Tendrils of smoke fasten around my wrists like manacles, and I feel myself being wrenched away.

“No.” I struggle against the bonds. “No, *no.* I’m not going to leave you… Let go… *Luliver!”*

I fall away from him, into the dark.

I awake in the cavern, cold and dark, knowing from the stiffness of my limbs that I'm really here, this time. Everything hurts, every joint and muscle and sinew.

The pain in my chest is worse.

He was there. Whatever I saw, somehow, was real, perhaps because we're on the same plane, and are connected by our marks. Perhaps because we're connected in an entirely different way.

I couldn't feel anything, but I felt how weak he was, the mere whisper of a soul beating inside the shredded shell he inhabited.

I bite my fist to keep myself from screaming.

I'm coming, I'm coming, just a little while longer…

The temptation to be sick rises inside me, alongside the flashes of his face, the bolts in his wings.

How long has he been like that? How long can he keep going? What else has he endured?

Something stirs above me, a shift in the air, a silent flick along the back of my neck. A white, thick substance hits the ground beside me, and I turn slowly to the ceiling.

A face glares at me through the gloom, a face once belonging to a woman, but now stuffed with an unnatural amount of eyes. She's suspended from the ceiling on a thick rope of white thread, more of which oozes from her mouth. Her human body stops at the waist, dissolving into the broad, brown body of a spider. Her arms reach down towards me, her hands replaced with sharp, hairy limbs.

"Killer," she murmurs, "I smell fire on you. You killed my children."

The gelatinous white goop drops down, and I just have time to turn before it lands on my face, grabbing my rapier and swinging it upwards.

Libby shrieks as I knock into her. Artemis is up in an instant, snatching up her bow and firing arrows into the gloom.

The spider-woman takes to the ceiling, scuttling into a wide hole in the corner. She disappears from view.

"Did you get her?" Apollo asks.

Artemis shakes her head. "Grab your packs," she tells us. "Quickly. Sephy, the door—"

I reach out my arms and tug the rock away, but something fastens around my middle halfway through and yanks me off the ground. Libby screams, my own breath wrenched away from me.

"Pay," seethes the woman, "you will pay…"

"Shoot her!" hisses Apollo.

"I could hit Sephy—"

"Do it!" I yell.

Artemis fires several arrows, striking the monster in the rear, but she doesn't drop me. The dogs are snarling. More spiders spill into the space.

I shouldn't have opened the door.

The monster drags me into her tunnel. I lash out, kicking and slashing, but she shoots me with more of her webbing, pinning my blade to my chest.

"Eat you," she says, "I'm going to eat you… feed you to the rest of my rest of my children."

Charming.

I'm almost certain she's Arachne, just as I'm almost certain there's no way for me to talk myself out of this. I've killed her *children* after all. I don't think she wants to hear that they came after us, first.

I wriggle around helplessly, the webbing like stiff, flexible iron. I can't cut myself free—

But I can burn myself.

My palms start to heat.

We burst into another cavern, just as the flames erupt in my fingers. They tear through my bonds and I draw my rapier, severing the threads at the base of my feet.

By the time Arachne realises she's not tugging me behind her, I'm free.

I race towards her, slicing through one of her legs. She lets out a low hiss as it falls away from her, but the pain hardly seems to register. Greenish-black blood pumps from the stump left behind, but she does not falter in her assault. She scuttles forward, spitting out webbing, as I skid for cover. The cavern is large, filled with piles of rock.

"Murderer," she crows, "defiler… I will suck the blood from your meat sack…"

I hurl out fireballs, wishing I had the strength to utter a witty retort about her having to catch me first. I don't, I can't. My heart thumps against my throat.

We wrestle over the space, dodging and diving. I tread air falling away from her. Her webbing catches my ankle and drags me back, one of her arms

pinning my shoulder before I can free myself. Hard pain ruptures there, but worse is when she takes her other arm and stabs me in the thigh.

Sharp, bloody heat radiates along the limb. I cry out, struggling against her grip. The pain intensifies. I can't move. Her awful face rises above me, pincers snapping.

"Eat… devour… destroy…"

I summon just enough energy to create another fireball and hurl it into her face. It's not enough to melt it off, but enough to send her hissing and reeling. I jerk my leg free, swiping for my sword, and haul myself into a standing position.

My leg feels like rubber beneath me.

Not good, not good.

I unfurl my wings, ripping them uncomfortably from my spine, and hurtle across the room before she can recover, slamming my rapier into her chest and twisting.

Her lungs make a harsh, sucking sound, wet and wretched. No scream, nothing. There's a flash of bewilderment in her face, as if she can't understand what's just happened. It's the most human look I've seen her wear.

Then it rolls away, her body collapsing in a pile of writhing limbs, and I sink to the floor.

My shoulder guard took most of her first attack. It's bruised, but not bleeding. My thigh is a different matter, a bloody, pulsing mess. I try to heal it with my powers, but it's almost an impossible task, trying to transfer my own energy inwardly. The pain is liquifying, and I almost pass out a few times trying to stitch the muscle back together. It bleeds a little less, and I tear off the remains of my skirt to bandage the rest, trying not to seethe.

For a while afterwards, I lie on the floor of the cavern, my body surrendering to this faint, prickling sensation, my limbs lead. My breath steadies and slows, and my mind slips somewhere else. I know I need to move, but it takes forever to climb slowly to my feet. Even my wings are stiff and sore, either because the magic dampener is starting to affect me or because I'm injured, I don't know. I'm still not used to pain, to the real, true kind.

I remember Hades being poisoned on patrol, and still finding the energy to fly, to get up, to come home to me.

I remember him, and I find the energy to crawl into the air, flying back into the tunnel. I drag myself forward on my hands and knees, into the dark.

It goes on for so long, I worry I've taken a wrong turn somehow, chosen the wrong route. It had seemed so fast when I was being pulled by Arachne. I'm exhausted, I'm hurt, but I force myself onwards, until the faint trickle of green-blue light reaches me from ahead.

The cavern is empty apart from a series of spider bodies and the remains of the camp. No signs of my friends. I rescue my torn pack and raid it for healing vials, but the only one I find has been smashed to pieces. I haul it onto my shoulders, limping onwards.

Apollo would have come for me, if he could. But if he's not dead…

I will feed you to the rest of my children.

My stomach clenches. I can't let that happen.

I whistle down the corridor, calling, not caring what I bring towards me.

There's no reply.

After an hour, I sit down and force myself to eat a couple of stale oatcakes, drinking half of what remains in my canteen. I could shoot myself for not topping it up before I left the cavern, but it's too far back now.

I have no idea where I am.

I have no idea where my friends are.

They could be dead. They could be dying.

No, no, *no.* I'm not letting that happen.

I force myself upright and tremble forward, casting out my senses like I did that day in the Undersea when I found the rope. I think I feel something, a weak, shaking force, but if it's a thread, I feel like something is sawing against it, or snipping it away, inch by inch.

The dampener. I feel it on my chest.

How long until we're all completely powerless?

I let out another whistle, every few minutes, and keep going. One step in front of the other. I can do it. The pain in my leg is sliding away, either because it's healing or it hurts too much to feel anymore.

Something scuttles up ahead. No, not scuttles, skitters. Something with claws. That rules out spiders, at least. I pause, swallowing all noise, hoping to still the pounding in my chest. It's big, but not enormous. Heavy breaths fill the corridor, more than one, tripping over each other.

Strange. It moves like one being.

Wait.

I let out a whistle, low, long, quiet. I keep my blade drawn just in case I'm wrong.

I'm not.

The dogs belt down the corridor and into my arms, licking my cheeks ecstatically. I bury myself between their heads and breathe them in for a moment, steadying myself. The scent of warm fur and hot soil softens the steel inside my chest.

I'm fine, I'm fine, I'm fine.

"The others?" I ask, inching back. "Where are they, boys?"

They give out a plaintive whimper.

Panic stutters in my chest.

"Where are they?" I ask again, more desperately than before.

Scrambling upright, I stare down the corridor, waiting from them to arrive at any moment.

They don't. Nothing does.

I start to move, quickening my gait, hurtling down the passageway the dogs came from. They follow after me, barking in warning. I don't stop.

A cavern opens up in front of me, tall and wide. A pale, blue-green light trickles from above, a waterfall dropping into a shallow pool. The light catches on the dozens of statues filling the space, statues of fae. High, goblins, pixies, fauns, nymphs… even a few centaurs. Most faces are a mask of horror, hands thrown outwards as if trying to shield themselves.

My breath stills in my chest.

They aren't statues.

They're people. Or they were, once.

Oh God. Did the others come down here? Is that what the dogs were trying to—

I scan the faces, searching, fearing—

The dogs growl, low and hard. Something slithers in the darkness.

Oh no.

I sprint towards the entrance, but the tail of a colossal serpent cuts across it. I avert my eyes, glancing upwards, searching for an escape, another passage. I flip open my wings and soar to the ceiling, feeling like an insect in a glass.

I'm trapped. I can't get out.

Hissing fills the cavern. The dogs growl, advancing on a figure below.

"No!" I yell, diving back down. I fling my wings up, wrapping them against my chest, creating a barrier between myself and my opponent. I brace myself for the blow. "Run, boys!" I hiss.

They don't.

The blow doesn't come, but a shadow cuts across us. I know if I look up, I'm dead.

"Don't hurt them," I whisper.

There's a long, empty pause, the shadows still as steel. "You're protecting them." Her voice is low, soft, cold, a stream given a voice.

"They don't need to die." *They're all I have right now. Please, please, don't hurt them!*

"My powers don't work on animals, only fae and mortals."

Relief doesn't unknot. *I'm* still not safe. And I've no idea where my friends are.

"You're… you're Medusa, aren't you?" I ask, trying to keep my voice steady. "Or… or one of her sisters? Eury… Eury or… Steph… I'm sorry. I don't remember their names."

There's another pause, shorter than the first. "You know of my sisters?"

"I've… I've heard of them." My father used to read me their story, tragic though it was. "But what I've heard might not be the truth."

A long, scaled tail, brown and striped, loops around me, not touching, not yet. I'm slow and weak and tired, and if she lashes out, I'm not sure I can fight her. I can't even look up, yet I feel her press of her gaze on me, solid and unwavering. "Tell me what you *have* heard," she asks.

"I've heard… that Poseidon violated you in Athena's temple, and that she cursed you as punishment. Your sisters were cursed along with you, so that anyone who looked upon you would turn to stone. In… in the tale I was told, you were slain by Perseus. But that obviously isn't true."

She laughs. "Perseus. As if *he* could have defeated me. No, I killed him. I killed every man who ever hurt me."

"*Every* man?"

I feel like she's smiling. There's laughter in her voice. "The first part of the tale is true enough. Poseidon violated me in Athena's temple. The fury of my sisters was matched only by the fury of Athena herself. But it was not directed at me. Poseidon held her wrath. Fae law meant she could not exact revenge herself, but when my sisters and I came to her and begged for justice, she gave us the means to take it."

"She made you like this on purpose?"

"It was reversible, once upon a time," Medusa continues. "Only we found that it suited us. Poseidon was only one man, after all, and so many others needed punishing. We developed rather a taste for it, and my taste only grew once my sisters were slain…"

I should probably fear her, but not in this moment. In this moment, I understand her. I'm already trying to tear down the world to get Hades back. If someone killed Libby, I'm not sure what would be left of me. The threads holding me to humanity are wearing awfully thin.

"I'm sorry," I tell her.

"What?"

"Your sisters. I'm sorry about what happened to them."

"It was…" She pauses, and I wonder how long it has been since anyone expressed sympathy for her. "It was a long time ago."

I think she means to suggest it doesn't hurt as much, anymore. I think it just hurts differently.

"Why don't the stories speak of you killing Perseus?" I ask instead.

"They don't like it when women fight back," she says sagely. "It makes them think we can win. Far better to believe we were made to hate each other and killed like the monsters we are."

"But you were never killed."

"No," she says. "I was caught, and thrown down here as a punishment for my crimes."

"But you only killed those that hurt others, that would have hurt you—"

"*I* know that!" she roars. "You think that mattered to *them?* To Zeus?"

I have to assume she's talking about the original one. "Zeus is dead now," I tell her. "Hera killed him."

She snorts. "Good for her."

I'm inclined to agree. "We have a queen, now."

"Excellent."

"No, it's not. She's a psychopath. I think she's the one person I'd feel no guilt killing."

Medusa hesitates. "You're an interesting person," she says. "What are you doing here?"

"I've come to save the man I love."

Another pause, quiet and soft. "You're Persephone."

I freeze. "Hades, Hades was here?" I chance a look upwards, glancing round at the statues, desperately hoping not to see him—

Medusa hisses, flinging herself into the shadows. "Careful!" she shrieks. "I haven't made up my mind about killing you yet, and I'd like not to off you until I'm sure."

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, he was here?"

"Yes," she says slowly. "He was."

“And you didn’t hurt him?”

“He was already half dead when he crawled in here. Didn’t seem fair. Didn’t even react when I crept closer. He seemed to understand what I was, but either he couldn’t move anymore or he didn’t care whether he lived or died…”

Hot tears slide down my face.

“He just whispered a name… your name. And that was enough to make me stop and ask who he was, what he was doing here. He seemed very surprised by that. Asked me why I wasn’t trying to kill him. I asked him the same. Do you know what he said?”

I swallow. “Tell me.”

“He said that he knew a little of the hurt that Poseidon wrought on me, and he wasn’t going to kill someone for that.”

My heart aches. “What happened?”

“I healed him, as well as I could, but then Kronos and the others found him and… that was that.”

“He’s… he’s not…”

“No,” she says. “Although he probably wishes he was by now. I’ve not heard him scream in a while.”

My knees slide out from underneath me, and I hit the ground fully. A dizzying nausea grips me. *Hades, Hades, Hades.*

“Help me,” I beg her. “Help me, and come back with me.”

“What?”

“When I save him, I’m opening the way again. I’m getting us out of here. Come with us. You’ve been down here too long. Your punishment was not fair—”

“Who are you to gainsay the will of the gods?”

“They are not gods,” I tell her, “and I’m the Queen of Hell. I pardon you for all your crimes—”

Medusa shrivels further into the shadows. “You cannot mean that.”

“I can.”

“You don’t know what I’ve done.”

“I know you should be forgiven—”

“You don’t know what I’ve done… to your friends.”

Cold, dawning realisation grips me. “No.”

“I’m sorry,” she said. “They attacked first.”

“No, no, *no*.”

I'm on my feet again, scrambling over the room, eyes running over every statue, every twisted face of fear and agony. I spot Apollo first, weapon raised, mid charge. Artemis is behind him, bow raised.

I twist, looking for the others. Peony is a few feet to the right, and next to her—

"No, no, Libby, *no*!"

I fling myself at her cowering statue, begging myself to feel flesh. Stone slams against me, and her face… her face is wrong, all wrong. She looks afraid and un-Libby like and awful.

This can't be real, it can't be happening. There's no way that Libby is gone.

"Don't be dead," I tell her, "please, please, don't be dead."

If she's dead, it's my fault. If she's dead, I've lost everything. No thought surfaces for Dad or Grandma or Aunt Imogen or anyone else. I can't recover from this, I won't. I'm spiralling, I'm falling. I'm imagining her parents, never knowing what happened to her, never knowing how brave and wonderful and spectacular their daughter really was.

Is, is, is.

I'm imagining my life without her, a world sucked free of her laughter, her teasing. The one thing that made me feel normal amidst the chaos. The raft in the storm.

And now the raft is gone and the lighthouse is broken and there's nothing but the rocks and churning, tumultuous sea.

I feel like I'm drowning.

Light starts to radiate from my body, and something cracks across Libby's chest. Medusa sucks in a breath.

"You're a healer," she gasps. "But you're a Hades—"

"And a child of Demeter," I respond, although this hardly seems to matter now. *Nothing* seems to matter now—

"We can save them," Medusa says, although she sounds uncertain.

I cease my sobbing. "What?"

"They've not been turned long. If you can heal them—"

I freeze, because I already know my powers aren't enough, that I don't have the strength or energy, that there's no way I can save all four of them, and I'm filled with a nauseating panic that I may be forced to choose—

But Medusa hasn't finished.

"The pool over there has healing properties. It should amplify your abilities. If we submerge them, we might be able to bring them back."

"*Might?*"

"Your friends aren't fully stone, not inside. It takes a while to… solidify. If we're quick—"

I grab Libby's stone arms and scrape her across the floor. Medusa wordlessly grabs her bottom half and we haul her into the shallows, submerging her beneath the surface.

Nothing happens.

"She's not—"

"Give it a minute!"

The minute stretches on forever. My thoughts crawl into every second, my fears and horrors amplifying, filling every iota of every minute.

Don't be dead, don't be dead, don't be dead…

The stone on Libby's fingers starts to melt, dissolving like tissue in water. The grey peels away to reveal fleshy fingers underneath.

"It'll take a while," Medusa says. "Let's grab the others."

I want to ask her why she hasn't tried to free anyone else over the years. Perhaps she has. Perhaps she hasn't. Perhaps the others deserved it.

I don't want half the answers she could give me, so I do not ask.

We manoeuvre the rest of them into the pool, and I press a fraction of my power into them.

And wait.

Medusa finds a rough receptacle and offers me some of the waters to drink. I sip a measure and splash it over my wounded leg. A warmth rises from within, almost burning, a slow, good chink of pain.

"We sent four scouts down here a few days ago," I tell Medusa. "Did you see them?"

She shakes her head. "I heard Iapetus boasting that he'd caught a group in the Labyrinth the other day. They'll have been taken to the centre."

"Killed?"

Out of the corner of my eye, I see her snakes shake. "Not immediately. They don't often have guests. They'll interrogate them, torture them, use them for fun…"

I suppress a shudder. "How close are we to the centre?"

"Not far, now."

"Will you help us?"

She looks down. "Yes," she says eventually. "I will help you, if you take me with you."

“I… I can do something else for you, too,” I tell her, thinking of the Ferryman.

“What?”

“I think I can glamour away your gaze, if you want me to? It might help when my friends come around with the whole not-attacking thing.”

She stills. “You… you could do that?”

“I think so.”

“Could you leave my snakes? I’ve grown rather attached to them over the centuries.” They give a quiet hiss, almost cooing.

“Sure.”

“Then yes,” she says. “Please.”

I raise my hands to her cheeks, eyes cast downwards. “What colour would you like?”

She laughs. “You can’t see me, little Hades, but I’m looking at you incredulously. Does it matter?”

“I suppose not.” I settle on green, bright and glistening as emeralds. I lift my chin slowly. “If this doesn’t work, throw me in the pool, too?”

She grins. “If I must.”

I face her fully for the first time. A part of me still expects to see a monster; I only changed her eyes. But the face that meets mine is beautiful. Her skin is dove-grey, her lips full, her features clear and sharp. The mass of snakes is draped over one shoulder, almost like curls. Bronze hoops dangle from her ears, and a scarf is wrapped around her scalp.

Her eyes gleam with tears. “This is the first time anyone has looked at me without fear since my sisters died,” she whispers. “Thank you.”

My throat feels tight, and it’s hard to look at her, but now for an entirely different reason. “It won’t last. I’ll have to keep re-doing it. But when we get back to the Underworld, I can make you a veil, or find something more permanent—”

Libby’s fingers start to twitch.

“Let’s get you all out of here, first,” she says.

I’m about to agree, when a scream cuts through the air. I still.

“The noise carries,” Medusa tells me. “They aren’t that close.”

It’s not Hades. I know that much. That shouldn’t comfort me; it’s still one of the other hunters. It has to be.

I look down at the others in the pool. Only Libby is close to… defrosting.

“How long until they’re up and about?”

“A while yet,” she says. “Why?”
“I’m going to scout ahead.”
“If they catch you—”
I flap my wings. “Let them try.”

Bold words for a stupid move, but I can't sit by. I can't let them suffer any more because we weren't strong or brave or fast enough. I'm the Queen of Hell. I can do *something.* Even if it's just report back to Artemis so that she can devise a better plan.

I can't do nothing. Not again. Not any more.

Medusa was right when she said the sound carried. The screams get louder, but I'm far from close. I regret not bringing the dogs with me. The company might help dispel the scratch of the sound against my chest.

I reach for the tug again, and find it, fainter than before, like it's almost gone. I hope that it *is* the dampener, and not that those I'm searching for are fading. That *he's* fading.

I let it guide me down the passageways. They grow brighter, taller, grander. The sconces glow with fine golden light, and I arrive at a grand gate.

It's locked with faerie magic, but the power in the chains is met by mine. A lesser fae would have struggled, but not the Queen of Hell. They dissolve in my grip, and I pass into a corridor. Caverns have been chiselled into rooms that are almost fine, although rough and worn around the edges. There is an imitation of luxury in the carved tables and faded tapestries, but everything looks old and haunted, despite the signs of life; empty place settings and puckered cushions.

I'm worried that nothing is guarded, that I've slipped easily into what is clearly the lair of the Titans. Either they didn't expect someone of my power to come… or they wanted it.

Turn back, turn back, fetch Artemis, wait for the others...

But the sounds of screaming have whittled to a low whimpering, and I have to let them know that we are here, that rescue is imminent.

A door slams around the bend. Two people laugh in the corridor.

"Nice to have guests again," says one.

The other chuckles. "I wish we got to play with them a bit more often."

"Kronus will let us have more fun. All in good time."

There's a gong in the distance. "Speaking of fun…"

They shuffle onwards, leaving no guard behind. I suppose they feel they don't need to. I race towards the door the minute they're out of sight. It's bolted and made of iron. It won't hurt a high fae, but it's unbendable.

What's not unbendable is the rock around the doorframe. I pull it out as easily as putty, gently levering the door off its hinges and placing it against the ground.

Daave, Pickal and Hazel are chained to the wall. All being lesser fae, the chains burn their arms. Hazel is slumped against the floor, bloodied and bleeding. He doesn't even look up when I enter.

Rage boils inside me. I'm not waiting for Artemis and the others. I'll get them out now and come back for Hades. I won't let them suffer a moment longer.

"Persephone!" Daave hisses. "What are you doing here?"

"Rescuing you, what does it look like?" I hover by Hazel's side, fixing what I can, imagining the muscles knitting back together. "Where's Willa?"

They both tense. "They killed her," Daave reports. "They thought it might… motivate Hades. To open the gate."

I swear under my breath. *Willa, Willa, I'm so sorry.*

"Where is he?" I break the chains from the wall surrounding each of them, dropping them carefully to the floor so as to not alert any guards.

"They took him out for a tournament," Pickal explains.

"A tournament?"

"They like to pull monsters out of the labyrinth and fight them. It's a sport for them."

I think of how awful he looked in my dream only last night, and try to imagine him fighting. "No—"

"They won't kill him," Daave assures me. "He's too valuable. If it looks like he's failing they'll pull him out and heal him up, just enough to..."

Just enough to survive, and make him fight again tomorrow.

Unthinking, I move towards the door, forgetting that there are twelve titans, forgetting that I don't have a plan, forgetting anything else but him—

A chain fastens around my throat, dragging me to the floor. The smell of burning flesh invades the air, but not mine, my captor's.

"Hazel!" screams Daave. "What are you doing!"

"I'm sorry, my lady," he breathes into my ear. "But Willa died for this. Hades is right. We can't let them escape. I'm sorry, I'm sorry…"

The other two run forward and yank him off me, hissing below their breath, muttering apologies. I roll to my knees, coughing.

A shadow cuts across the room.

A woman, tall, proud, brown-haired, with warm sepia skin, stands at the threshold, beautiful despite her plain grey dress and simple jewellery of braided bronze and leather. There's a regal quality to her face impossible to ignore, aided by the simple circlet in her hair.

"What's going on in here?" she asks.

"I had to, I had to," Hazel wails, and he grovels at her feet, prostrating himself in front of her. "She's Hades. She can open the gate. You understand, you understand, I know you do…"

Fear spreads across her face, and even though she is a titan, even though she should *want* that, it seems she's just as keen as the others to keep the way closed.

She opens her mouth, but another person, a man as dark and tall and powerful as an oak, appears behind her. He looks at the broken door, and to me.

"Well Rhea," he says, "What do we have here?"

It was stupid to race off without a plan. It was stupid to open the door and try to free the others before working out how we would escape, or where Hades was.

It was stupid to come in the first place.

At best, I've gotten us all killed.

At worst… I don't want to think about that.

I hope they let me see Hades again.

And then I hope they kill me quickly.

I wonder if Artemis is awake by now, desperately coming up with a strategy. Are the four of them a match for the Titans? Will Medusa help like she promised?

They haul all four of us forward into an arena flooded with orange light. It's rough and raw and barren, cut with sand and stone. Blood cakes the ground, some black, a lot red.

Some of it is Hades'. I know it is.

And some of it is Willa's.

I follow one bloodstain to a corpse in the corner of the room, recognisable only by her blue skin. I force myself not to look at the remains any more closely than that. It's not her. Not any more.

My gaze turns instead to the nine people—five men, four women—arranged around the circle.

The Titans. Something more than faeries, less than gods.

But only just.

Each of the men are impressively muscular, not slim and lithe like their descendants. Their women, too, look like warrior queens. They're all tall, and I feel like an ant beneath their stares. They're simply dressed in loose clothing, but their power and might shines through in every scrap of armour.

Decorative, of course. Little can pierce their skin.

We're tossed onto the floor beneath a throne of stone, intricately cut. A giant of a man stares down at us, raising only his huge head by way of greeting. We are worth no more effort. He is unnaturally large, twice the size of any mortal man, gold-skinned and silver-haired and chiselled like marble. He wears a crown of leaves, but his similarity with the fae ends there. Faeries are water and air, and he is earth and fire and something else, something beyond name, beyond description. Some ancient and unfathomable.

Kronos.

"What have we here?" he booms. "Another rescuer? You said there were no others, boys."

"She came after us," Pickal explains.

Kronos strokes his chin. "Alone?"

I answer before they can. "Yes."

My one chance—*our* one chance—is that the others are coming for us. That Artemis' intelligence is greater than my stupidity.

I thank my stars I didn't tell the others about them. They don't have the luxury of lies.

"That was foolish," says Kronos. "What power have you against the might of the Titans? Did you think you alone would be enough?"

"Honestly?" I say, summoning false confidence. "Yeah."

At this, he frowns. I'm bluffing, of course I am, relying on my fae face to hide any aspect of mortality, relying on the hope they'll not think me capable of lying.

Stall, Sephy, stall.

"Her arm," he barks to one of the guards. "Show it to me."

The guard seizes my hand and tears off my armguard. He holds it up, displaying the half-mark stamped on my wrist.

Kronos grins, an expression that feels like it could shake the very stones. “Well, well, well,” he says. “The other half of Hades. This *is* interesting.” He snaps his fingers. “Bring out the other one.”

Other one?

A door in the side of the room opens up, and a woman comes forward, dragging someone behind her on a chain, someone dressed in black rags, raven hair plastered to his face with congealed blood and sweat, crusted down his face like grotesque rubies.

My heart lurches. Hades.

He doesn’t notice me at first. His eyes are cast downwards. He looks worse than before, limping and bloodied, his pale skin drained of all colour apart from the mottling of bruises.

Rage implodes inside me. They were going to make him fight like this?

Kill them. Kill them all.

“Look up, young Hades. We’ve brought you a gift.”

Slowly, Hades’ gaze moves upwards. One eye is bloodied beyond recognition, but the other opens wide in fear. He jerks against his chains, moving towards me. I bolt from my spot, but the guard’s hand seizes my throat and smashes me against the ground. He’s impossibly strong.

I don’t give up. Hades is *there,* a few feet in front of me. I thrash against his grip, summoning my wings. Hades jerks at that, as if he hadn’t expected it.

One of the other titans leaps from her seat and presses a spear to my back. The ground trembles where she lands. “Move again and this goes through your wing,” she says. “Move a second time and I take it from your body.”

I know that titans are capable of lying, but I believe her. I can’t afford not to. I *need* these wings. I need them to get us out of here.

I’m hauled back to my feet and thrown in front of Kronos again.

“Now, now, this *is* interesting,” he says. “You’ve given us quite the gift, girl. I’m just working out how to unwrap it…”

I ball my fingers into fists, digging my nails into my palms to disguise the trembling. *Think, Sephy, think.*

I need to be someone else, just for a moment. Not foolish, silly Sephy who rushes into danger, who doesn’t think when other people are hurt. I

need to think like Artemis. No, like Hades, wearing a mask for all of his reign.

You are Titania, Queen of the Fairies.

No. You are the Queen of Hell. And you will act like it.

"We could never quite break him, you know," Kronos says. "No matter what we did, he never agreed to open the gate. Do you know why?"

"I am sure that you will tell me."

"Because he said it didn't matter what we did to him. He would never open the gate. That world above was worth more to him than his own life. Because *you* were on it."

My stomach caves.

"I gather many things have changed in the centuries we've been gone. But love… love is just the same." He turns his gaze to Hades. "So, will you open it now, or do we have to cut her first?"

Hades says nothing, because he cannot lie.

"Or maybe we'll just cut you. I'm sure she's not keen to hear you scream either, if she came all this way for you. I wonder who will break first."

A horrible, sickening silence spreads at the drop of Kronos' grin, before Hades jerks in his chains. "Cut me," he says, the roughness of his voice slicing through me. "Since you seem to enjoy screaming so much. She'll be able to endure mine a lot longer."

I can say nothing to that, because he's wrong, so wrong, because he's already in terrible shape and I've dreamt of his screams so often I can't take another one. But how can he say that? How can he possibly think that's true?

Look at me, I beg him, *please. I came here for you. You must know what that means.*

Kronos turns his gaze back to me. "Tell me, Queen of Hell, what would you do to save him? Would you do *anything?"*

I feel like whatever I say here is a lie. "No," I say, because it gives me more words, more things to say, more ways to stall. "Not anything. And he knows it. There are things that I still love, people I would not sacrifice."

"Very well," he says.

He plucks a dagger from his belt, and flings it across the room. It lands neatly in Hazel's chest, and he slumps towards the ground.

Pickal lets out a wail.

I stare at his empty eyes. It doesn't matter that a few minutes ago, he tried to kill me. I understand why.

What I don't understand is why he's dead.

"Why… why would you…" I stare blankly back at Kronos.

"There are other types of pain," he says. "How much do you think he can stand to watch you endure, before he caves completely?"

"I'll kill you," I swear to Kronos. "I'm going to *destroy* you."

The Titans laugh, all apart from Rhea. She stands beneath Kronos' throne, her eyes downcast. It occurs to me that she's his wife. She looks like a queen, but she is not standing beside him.

"Die, girl?" Kronos roars. "We're titans. We *can't* be killed. That's why we're here. Didn't you pay attention in history class?"

I smile, forcing all my energy into it, and lie with every breath. "You've been down here a long time, Kronos. When you were cast into the pit, it was true that no weapon could kill you. But that was then."

A flicker of something, barely there. "You have some weapon hidden about your person?"

"Perhaps," I say, and force a grin. Perhaps is an excellent word for liars to use. It gives them nothing. Perhaps I do have it. Perhaps someone else does. Perhaps *I* am the weapon.

"You truly have the means to kill us?"

"I do."

A disturbed murmur passes through the crowd.

"Then why haven't you used it yet?" Kronos asks.

He's got me there. I don't have an answer. I have nothing. Nothing at all—

An arrow shoots across the entrance and bounces across Kronos' head. It leaves a shallow cut that heals almost immediately.

"What—"

I twist backwards. Artemis is standing at the entrance.

"Who are you?" he sneers.

"I am Artemis of the Hunt," she declares. "That arrow was laced with a deadly poison. I daresay it won't kill you. But it will probably paralyse you for a while."

"You—" He climbs to his feet, but his massive body sways. "Impossible—"

"Unlikely," she states. "Not impossible."

Someone hurls a spear towards her, but she jumps easily out of the way. Apollo soars out of the tunnel after her, his own bow nocked. "I'm Apollo, Lord of the Sun," he says, "not that anyone asked. But that's *my* sister. And

you aren't allowed to shoot at her." He fires a series of arrows. "Not without getting shot back."

Absolute pandemonium erupts as my team arrives, together with a handful of monsters they must have flushed out of the labyrinth. They're hardly allies, but neither are they enemies, either. And they're angry. They lash out at the Titans, sinking teeth and talons into flesh and muscle.

"Fools!" hisses the woman of midnight and silver. "Stop the prisoners!"

We are still the primary targets. The Titans dive into the arena, weapons drawn as arrows rain down on them. My captor draws a dagger and places it against my back, but Hades charges at him, knocking him to the floor.

"Hades!"

"Run!" he hisses.

"*You* run!"

I seize the fallen titan's neck and snap it. I'm certain that won't delay him long. Hades looks mildly horrified. I want to say something else—I have so much to say—but there's too many people, too much going on.

Libby appears at my side, brandishing the rope. She places it in a circle. Artemis leaps forward, firing arrow after arrow, humming the words to activate it. Bright, hot light emanates from within.

Libby hauls Daave to his feet, and pushes him inside, followed by Pickal. The dogs leap across the battlefield, waiting for a command.

"Where are we—" Pickal starts.

"Just trust me," Libby shouts. "Go!"

I think of the storm that drove us into the labyrinth to begin with, and think ofDaave and Pickal facing it alone, injured and exhausted. No. They need to get out. But our forces are scattered. Apollo is in the skies, Medusa is smacking titans beside the entrance. Peony is—

Shit. Where's Peony?

"Artemis!" I hiss. "Where's Peony?"

Artemis fires off three arrows in rapid succession, skids against a fallen enemy, and plucks the shaft from his chest before firing it into the chin of an approaching minotaur. "She went to check the cells… we weren't sure where you all were—"

But there's no one in the cells. No one to save.

Peony.

No, we're not losing anyone else.

"Persephone." Hades' voice, calling to me. The second word he's said to me since I appeared. Begging, pleading, looking at the circle.

One of us needs to go and open the way back. One of us needs to stay and ensure everybody makes it.

Hades doesn't know what to do. He can't stay. But there's no way he'll leave me. No way unless—

I meet his gaze. "Don't hate me for this," I say, and fly towards him. I grab his face. If I touch any more of him, I'll break. I won't be able to let go. "Luliver Edelvard Lore," I whisper, my voice low, "Go back through the portal. Open the gate. Let our allies out. Do not let anything stop you until you are safely back within the walls of the palace."

His eyes grow wide at this violation, but I can't stop to think of it.

"I'll be right behind you," I tell him.

I don't wait to see if he goes. I know he has no choice. I know we're running out of time.

He can be angry later. He'll be alive.

He's alive, he's alive, he's alive.

Artemis is still covering our escape route, firing arrows at anyone who comes close. Monsters have been let loose; the creations they no doubt expected Hades to fight. A manticore and a cyclops. Medusa is battling one of them.

Libby has disappeared, presumably into the portal. Artemis is yelling at Apollo.

I stream towards the cells.

"Persephone!" Artemis screeches after me.

I ignore her.

A giant leonine face rises up to greet me. I summon my weapon into my hand—it must have fallen from whatever titan disarmed me—and slice through the sky above it, hacking off its tail. I don't stop to finish it off. We may not have time. Artemis' arrows will not last forever, although she's plucking them from fallen bodies to re-use.

I stream into cells. Peony is on the floor beside a downed Rhea and the body of another manticore, breathing heavily and staring at her hands.

"Peony!" I gasp.

"I, um, yes?" she says, as if she's forgotten her own name.

"Are you all right?"

"I… I think so."

The front of her tunic is stained with blood. My eyes widen. "Are you hurt?"

She shakes her head, glancing down at Rhea. "She healed me."

“What?”

I look down at the body of the fallen queen. She has a story. I’m only familiar with a sliver of it, the women of the legends frequently sidelined, but I wish I knew more. Why she didn’t want the gate opened. Why she healed Peony.

I’ll likely never know. I can’t afford to take a titan back with me. They’re down here for a reason, not like Medusa’s. The world can’t handle their raw power.

“Come on,” I say, shaking away my sympathies. “We need to go.”

Peony’s slower than me, so I grab her in my arms as I hurtle over the battleground, almost dropping her into the portal. Apollo appears beside me. The Titans are still fighting. We’re out of arrows. Only Medusa is out of reach.

“Medusa!” I call. “Come on!”

She flings another titan to the floor, and streams towards us. I force her into the hole, Apollo and Artemis seconds behind her, and grab the rope.

Someone lunges for me, but I’m already gone.

PART
3

A rope ladder is dangling from the open seal, and all but the four of us have already vanished up it. We don't wait, either. Apollo swoops Artemis into his arms, and I pull Peony into mine. Apollo, looking somewhat wary, goes back for Medusa.

We emerge on the other side of the gate. I let Peony siddle off, ignore the gasps from onlookers when Medusa emerges in Apollo's grip, and seal everything again.

The fragments snap back together with impossible finality, and the world turns impossibly still.

"Sephy!" A voice breaks through the quiet, grappling me into a fierce hug. Libby. I hold her back. "I was scared out of my freaking *mind.* Who allies with Medusa? No offense."

"Some taken," says Medusa coolly.

"You're OK?" I ask her.

"I'm OK. You?"

I nod. "Hades—"

"Went back on a boat with the other two. Didn't seem happy about it, though." She clasps my shoulders, smiling, dark eyes shimmering. "We did it."

I feel numb and slightly sick and then everything at once. "We did."

"We should head back," she says. "Your parents must be freaking."

My parents. How strange to say that. Parents. Plural. I have two.

I turn to Medusa. "Coming with us?"

"I don't imagine I have many other offers right now," she says, and keeps close to me as we glide towards the boats. Everyone eyes her cautiously, and her snakes hiss at them.

"They'll get better," I tell her.

"I'm used to it," she assures me.

"Doesn't make it all right."

She smiles at me, snakes curling softly around her face and shoulders. "I've never met another faerie like you before."

“Well, I was raised mortal,” I tell her.

“So was I.”

We laugh at this, laugh with more than that statement, with relief, with something like joy.

I shed my armour in the boat, and lean against Libby’s shoulder. I’m conscious of the blood under my nails, the sweat and grime caked onto my clothes, the utter mess of my hair.

Maybe I should have a bath before I see Hades.

No. I’m not wasting another second.

We cannot reach the palace soon enough. I think about flying, only I’m not sure my wings could carry me, and I might arrive before him. Hades can’t have been more than a few minutes ahead.

Dad is waiting at the bank, pulling me into his arms as we disembark. We hang there for a long while, saying nothing.

“I’m all right,” I assure him.

“I know,” he says, although his sniffing suggests otherwise. He lets me go, and looks at the rest of our team. His eyes widen into saucers. “Is that Medusa? Or Euryale? Stheno?”

“Medusa,” I say.

“Oh, wow.” He drops away from me, staring at her as if she’s some kind of rock star, or if he’s debating making a bow. “Pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

She stares at him like he’s speaking another language.

“My father,” I explain. “He’s a fan.”

“I am!” he says, clapping his hands together. “Would you like something to eat?”

The staring continues.

He turns towards me, eyes shifting. “Is she… trying to turn me to stone?”

“I just don’t think she’s used to people being nice, Dad.”

“Oh,” he says. “Well, understandable. We’ll do something about that. Libby dear, are you hungry?”

“Famished.”

He puts his arms around her shoulders. “To the kitchen, then. Come on.”

He walks them ahead of me, gesturing for Medusa to follow. They disappear into the palace. I pause for a moment, staring at the open doors, terrifyingly aware of how close I am to home, to *him.*

I drift through the corridor, hunters and Unseelie bowing in my wake. Irma is posted outside my door. Hades' door. *Our* door.

"How is he?" I ask, my voice warbling.

She nods. "Banged up, but easy enough to put back together. Put up a good fight when he realised you weren't following."

I think that should make me smile. But it doesn't. I need to see him.

"He's still awake?"

"He has refused anything but some light pain medication."

"That sounds like him."

She moves aside, and lets me pass. A dozen or so hunters and healers initially cloud my view of him, but I catch a glimpse as Emetria rushes forward to embrace me.

"I'm all right," I tell her.

She grabs my face, examining me for injuries. I shuck her off.

"I'm *fine*, Mother. Don't fuss."

She smiles, her eyes brimming. "Can't help it, I'm afraid."

My gaze falls to Hades' face, and his to mine. The look is as solid as stone, as tight as wire. We do not say anything, but one by one, every other person in the room shuffles out of it. Everyone except the dogs, who remain loyally beside him.

The doors click shut. My heart thumps wildly.

He's here, he's here, he's here.

I cannot move, and I think he lacks the strength to even stand.

"I'm sorry I had to force you to go," I babble. "I just… I had to. I'm sorry. I'm fine. I—" I want to tell him my true name, to even that score, but he cuts across me.

"It's all right," he says.

I can't say anything to that. My eyes are filling. All of me is filling. I feel like I'm about to crack, to split all over the place. Why am I still standing here? How am I capable of standing at all?

"I didn't think you'd come for me," he says, his voice like shredded glass.

How could he *possibly* think that I wouldn't come for him? "You made me Queen of Hell."

"To protect you," he insists. "Not so you would come and get me back. I never expected…" He looks down. "Are you… are you still mad?"

I bite my lip, the shame and guilt welling up inside. How could he possibly, *possibly* think I was still angry at him for something I should never

have been angry about in the first place? “No. No, I'm not mad at all.”

“Then—”

I bolt across the room and throw myself into his arms, sobbing into his chest, my fingers balled into fists. I’m not sure I get any words out, but it doesn’t matter. He’s crying too. We hold each other and weep, and I feel broken and fixed all at once.

I seize his face and kiss him, and dissolve into shards of ember under the quiet press of his lips. It feels so good and awful to kiss him again, to have him in my arms, but there’s everything and nothing behind his trembling touches, his shaking lips, like half of him has been sucked away or he’s grasping onto smoke.

“I love you,” I choke. “I love you, and I missed you, and I’ve been so, so scared…”

“I’m sorry,” he sobs, “I’m so sorry.”

I clutch his face. “You *know* that I love you, right? Because I’m not letting go until you believe it. I’m not letting go of you *ever.* Not again. I promise you. I promise—”

Hades doesn’t reply. He’s shaking far too much. So am I. I kiss him between sobs, clutching at his clothes, his face, his hair, his hands. He holds me just as fiercely, and I’m shattering everywhere, all at once. I keep calling his name and telling him that I love him, and he clings to me more with every word.

“I thought of you every day, every moment,” I rush, my words tumbling over themselves. “I’ve been going mad without you. I thought I was going to die without you.”

Hades says nothing to this. I don’t think he can. I’m sure there were times in the past weeks where he’s wanted to die. Maybe even begged for it.

I hold him tighter at that thought.

He traces his fingers across my freckle-less cheeks, brushing my skin to the tip of my newly-pointed ears.

“You look different.”

“My freckles are gone,” I tell him, even though it seems silly to be sad at such a thing, I know he’ll understand.

His fingers glide down my face. “I miss your ears.”

“My eyes are different too. Flecks of violet, like Emetria’s. I tried… I thought about glamouring myself to the way I looked before—”

“You’re still perfect.”

I don't know if I want to smile or cry. "I don't always feel like me, any more. Like the old Sephy died when… when you…" I swallow. His face looks pained, too.

"I'm sure I'll like this new one just as much."

I bury myself in his shoulder again, and feel a little more myself for his presence.

For a long while, we lie like that, not speaking a word, just holding each other. I'm exhausted and alive simultaneously.

"We should get you cleaned up," I say, "before we fall asleep. I say, 'you'. I mean us. I'm a mess, too."

He smiles into my sweat-streaked hair. "I didn't notice."

"I know that you can't lie, but that still feels like one."

I tug him into the bathroom, never leaving his side. He glances around the room at my things. The toothbrushes and combs, a few scattered hairpins.

"You moved in."

"It was the closest I could get to you."

He doesn't say anything to this, his eyes staring at the sink. "There's another toothbrush."

"Libby's here," I tell him. "Long story, but she's been bunking with me."

"I thought I saw her earlier. I wasn't sure."

I wonder what kind of state he was in that he didn't notice, or if he couldn't under my command. At the back of my mind, I wonder if I should go and check on her, make sure she's got a place for the night. But I'm sure she's fine. Dad and Artemis will take care of her.

I lean across and turn the bath taps.

Hades frowns. "Can you not snap them on and off?"

"I can, I just don't. I never quite got used to it. I never liked having that power, the reminder of where I got it from." I look at him. "Can you still—"

I've never been sure what part of my ineptitude stems from the fact I'm part mortal, or me, or because I've been sharing his powers.

But Hades takes one glance at the taps and they turn off.

My ineptitude, then. "You didn't even snap!"

"I don't need to," he says, looking downwards. "I just did it because I thought it looked cooler."

I laugh, briefly leaning against his shoulder, and click the taps back on. His fingers go towards the mark on my wrist, and he kisses the spot there.

“Has this ever happened before?” I ask him. “Two Hades, sharing a mark?”

He shrugs. “I’m not sure. We’ll have to do some research. I’m not sure what it will mean.”

“I haven’t been very good at it,” I admit. “Not sure if it’s because I only have a fraction of the power, or because I’m half mortal, or because I’ve not really been myself lately, but…” I lean against him again. “I’ll be better now. We’ll *both* be better.”

He says nothing to this. For a moment, we sit in silence, quietly savouring the feel of one another, breathing each other in.

“Persephone Serra Lore,” I tell him quietly.

“What’s that?”

“My true name,” I tell him.

He looks at me sharply. “But that’s—”

“Part of yours. Yes. I know. I don’t know why. Not enough people share their true names with each other for there to be much of a record of this sort of thing, but… I have an inkling of why.”

He links his fingers into mine. “I have an inkling, too.”

We don’t say any more than that. The bath steams behind us, almost full. I reach up to unbutton his shirt. Hades flinches.

“I won’t hurt you.”

“Not what I’m worried about.”

“I know.”

I peel back the fabric. His skin beneath it is ravaged, stained, puckered. Cut upon cut, mottled with bruises. Claw and bite marks litter every inch. I raise my hand to his chest, light radiating from my fingertips, but nothing happens.

Hades clutches my hand. “Emetria already tried,” he says. “It’ll heal, though, now that I’m back here. They didn’t have any celestial steel to cut me with—”

I unlace my bodice, and drop it to the floor. Skirts, belts, boots, trousers follow. I shuck everything off until I’m standing there in nothing but my mortal underwear.

Hades’ eyes widen. “What are you—”

“I’m different too,” I tell him. “And you might think it’s a pretty kind of different, but I don’t like it either. I don’t feel like me, any more. I’m ashamed when I don’t need to be ashamed.”

I take off the rest of his shirt. He's so thin. I can see his ribs. Parts of me are more visible too, but not like this. We're both exposed, broken, vulnerable.

I kiss his stomach as I help him out of his trousers. "You can show me anything," I tell him. "I will keep nothing a secret from you. My heart is your heart, your body my body…" I place my hand over his chest. "I will hurt neither."

He slides his palm over my bare chest, my heart thumping wildly beneath his touch. "Mine," he says, half-questioning. He kisses me, light and soft. "Mine."

We climb into the tub together, knees knocking, crouching in the water. Slowly, methodically, we scrub away at the dirt and blood and grime, and feel a little less broken for having shared our scars.

Eventually, we tumble out of the bath and crawl between the bedsheets, not bothering to dress. His skin is radiating with a thin warmth, and I try to focus on the smell of his skin and the beat of his heart rather than the paleness of his face and the gaunt, hollow look of his cheeks.

He tells me he is afraid to sleep, so I remind him that I'm still here, that I'm going nowhere, and whisper sweet nothings until he drifts off in my arms.

I hold every inch of him as he slumbers. Skin, muscle, bone, person. Mine. All my mine.

He's here, he's here.

I brush his hair from his face and kiss his brow, squeezing out whatever troubles might be lurking behind it. I'm too afraid of whispering and waking him, so I just think what I want him to hear instead.

You're safe, Luliver. I have you. Everything's all right now.

I drift off to sleep, curled around him. For a little while, my dreams are untroubled. No images disturb me. All is quiet.

In the middle of the night he bolts upright, scrambling out of the bed, his eyes wild.

"It's all right, Luliver," I whisper in the dark. "You're safe."

I reach for him, but he moves away from me and dives into the bathroom, retching into the toilet. I bring the lights up, just a fraction, and follow him in, making up a glass of water and sitting beside him to stroke his back as he convulses. I murmur words, but I don't think he hears me. His face is beaded with sweat, his skin clammy, and I'm trying to work out if it's just fear and stress or if there's something wrong with him.

I coil my fingers into his damp hair. "Are you all right?"

He shakes beneath me. "I'm vomiting into a toilet."

"I mean… should I fetch Emetria?"

"No," he says quietly. "I don't want anyone but you."

He vomits once more into the bowl, and I stroke his back until the trembling subsides. A few minutes tick by in silence.

"Do you think you're done?"

"I'm not… I'm not sure."

I hand him the glass of water. He drinks thirstily, swilling out his mouth, and I tug him away from the floor and into my lap. "We'll stay here until you're sure," I say, winding my fingers through his damp tresses. It's longer than I remember, not as thick or satiny. So much of him has been sucked away.

He balls his fingers into fists. "What if that's all night?"

"All night, all of tomorrow, I don't care."

He says nothing, but squeezes me tighter.

"It's all right," I tell him. "It's all right."

"You're lying again."

"No, I'm not," I assure him. "You're here, and you're safe, and we're together, and even if it's hard right now, even if it's not perfect, it *is* all right. Or it's going to be."

"I… I want to believe you…" he says, "but I don't *feel* all right."

I swallow, wishing there was a way to squeeze that out of him, a magic that was strong enough to fix the unseen, to wrench the hurt from him.

At those words, I didn't feel all right, either.

"You don't have to feel all right," I tell him. "You feel what you feel. Just know that I'm here."

I tug his hands free from his fists, and raise his white knuckles to my lips. I lace his fingers into mine.

"I think… I think I'd like to go back to bed now," he whispers, and I nod, drawing him off the floor and back under the covers. We tangle together in the dark.

“I’d sing to you, but you’ll recall I’m not very good at that.”

“Maybe you could tell me a story instead. Tell me something good that’s happened while I’ve been gone.”

My mind draws a complete blank. I know that good things *must* have happened, tiny, little things at least, but it’s hard to summon anything.

“I got my memories back,” I tell him eventually. “Of when we first met, of all the times you visited me… everything.”

He hesitates, perhaps trying to work out if this is good or bad. “And?”

“And if I hadn’t had to lose them each time, I think I could have grown up loving you.”

He goes quiet for a while at that, hugging my middle. “As long as you’re not mad at me for taking them away in the first place.”

“Never.”

He smiles. “Liar.”

“I may be mad at you again at some point,” I tell him, smoothing his hair, “but it’s hard to think of that right now. I’m just too glad to have you back.”

We hold each other through the night, sometimes talking, sometimes sleeping. He wakes several more times, jolted awake by nightmares, certain the rescue was just a dream. I wake too, imaging the same thing. *We never got him out. He’s still there. I’m just imagining he’s here with me, like I imagined so many other times…*

“I’m sorry I keep waking you up,” he whispers.

“I was already awake.”

“Are you lying?”

“Just a little bit.” I thumb his cheeks. “I don’t mind being awake with you. I need the reminder that you’re here, too. I’ve dreamt of it too many times to believe you’re real.”

He holds my hand, pinning me against him. “I dreamt of you too. But you weren’t always nice. Most of the time you were shouting at me.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Are you apologising for what you did in my dreams?”

“I’m apologising that the last conversation we had before everything happened was me shouting at you. What you must have thought…”

“All sorts of things,” he says. “I thought all sorts of things. But I remembered your face as I fell, and even the darkest moments, I convinced myself that maybe, *maybe*, if I got out, you wouldn’t be *too* annoyed with me. That maybe you would forgive me.”

I sniffle into his chest. “I dreamt of you while I was in the maze,” I tell him. “Only that wasn’t quite a dream, was it? You had it too.”

“Yes.”

“So you know you have nothing to be sorry for?”

“I am not accustomed to being forgiven,” he says. “So you’ll have to forgive me if it takes a while.” He sighs, leaning his head against mine so that our noses slot together. “I still can’t believe you came for me.”

“You would have done the same for me.”

“I would have come straight down, been very romantic and very foolish, and died very quickly.”

“Glad to see your humour is still intact. It’s like my third favourite thing about you.”

“What’s first and second?”

“Your impressively sculpted chest and your gorgeous eyes.”

“You’re lying, aren’t you?”

“Yes.”

He pauses. “I’ve never much cared for my eyes.”

“No?”

“They’re my mother’s eyes.”

I freeze, knowing just how much is packed into this admission, feeling, just for a second, what it must be like to look at your reflection and see the eyes of the woman who tortured you. “No,” I say, shaking my head, and keeping my gaze on his beautiful, perfect honey-gold eyes as long as possible, “they’re yours. No one else’s.”

We sleep for a little longer, eventually woken by a soft hammering on the door. I’ve lost all track of time, but the grandfather clock in the corner tells me it’s almost ten. I don’t know what day. I’m dimly aware of the month. It’s not quite May.

“Um, Seph?” Libby’s voice calls out gently. “I’m really super sorry for disturbing your well-earned rest, but like, everything I own is in that room. Can I come in and grab it? Or you can grab it. Whatever.”

I glance at Hades. “Do you mind if she—”

“Sure,” he says.

I raise the lights, glamour some clothes, and beckon her in. She looks pretty good for someone who was fighting for her life yesterday. She’s wearing a loose grey tunic and nothing else, her hair pleasantly tousled from a good night’s rest. She glances over at Hades, who hugs the covers around

his middle as if the most awkward thing about this encounter is the fact he wriggled into his Harry Potter PJs at some point in the night.

"Morning, gorgeous," she says, as she walks around the room collecting discarded bits of clothing.

Hades just stares at her.

"That's you," I tell him. "You're gorgeous."

"While that is a verifiable fact, I'm wondering why she's calling me that. Aren't you mad about that time I glamoured you?"

"Eh, water under the bridge," she says, grabbing her toothbrush. "But if you hurt Sephy in any way—"

"Libby—"

"Hey, I know you can look after yourself now, but it's gotta be said."

"No, it doesn't. Leave him alone."

She sighs. "I've been replaced." She finishes stuffing her things into a bag and starts heading to the door. "While I'm here…"

I narrow my eyes. "Go on."

"The rest of the guys were wondering if now we've got him back if maybe, possibly, he could summon a few more rooms for us? Maybe another bathroom or two? You know, when you can. We've been crowded together for a while now…"

Hades turns to me. "You can't summon rooms?"

"I told you I wasn't very good!"

"I'll teach you." He waves a hand. "It's done."

Libby snorts. "Yeah, right."

He raises an eyebrow. She steps out into the corridor, and then back again, eyes wide with surprise.

"Holy shit."

Hades looks moderately pleased by this reaction.

"There's a bunch of extra doors out there. Just like that."

"Just like that."

"Seph, with all due respect, you're fired. Not like, as my friend. Because I still like you. Just as Hades."

I glare at her. "Thanks."

"You're welcome." She turns back to Hades, halfway out of the door. "Good to see you, by the way. Take care."

She vanishes, and we're alone once more. I flump back down on the bed. "Sorry about her."

"Why? She's a delight. I might prefer her to you."

“Ha. Ha.” I lean over to kiss him, but before I can, there’s another knock at the door. I groan.

“Sephy?” my father asks. “You’ve been in there like, a day. Are you hungry?”

“I’m fine, Dad, we can summon food straight here!”

“All right…” He shuffles off again.

Hades’ eyes go wide. “Your dad’s here?”

“Yeah, it’s a long story, but he knows everything and… are you all right?” There’s a stark look of panic in his expression.

“I’ve never met anyone’s dad before. I mean, I’ve technically already met him but… mainly when I glamoured him. Oh, sweet spirits, does he hate me already?”

“He’ll love you.”

“Yes, fathers are known for loving the men that kidnap their daughters and take them to the Underworld, said no one ever.”

“He knows it’s not like that.”

“Does he, Sephy? Does he really?”

I kiss his cheek. “I’m going to go let him know everything’s OK. Hopefully he won’t bother us anymore. And…” I click my fingers, and summon a breakfast tray to the bedside. A steaming bowl of hearty porridge appears, accompanied by toast and tea. I try not to be too smug about managing that. “Try and eat something, ‘k?”

I scramble out of bed and head along to the kitchen. It’s a bit late for breakfast, but Dad is still there at the long table with a book and a mug of coffee. Libby is sitting on the counter being taught how to juggle by one of the goblins that came to us from Valerian’s court. Artemis and Apollo are arguing about something in the corner, and Emetria is stirring something medicinal over the hob. It smells of citrus and peppermint.

I pick a muffin out of the basket on the counter and throw myself into the seat beside dad. There’s something about this that feels oddly normal. The background bickering and quiet chatter reminds me of Christmas mornings when the whole of our family would get together.

Dad looks up over the top of his book. “Sephy… are you eating a chocolate muffin for breakfast?”

I wipe a few crumbs from my chin. “Um, yes?”

“Is that appropriate?”

“Leave her be,” says Emetria off-handedly. “She needs to eat something.”

“You’re the goddess of cereal! Conjure her some shredded wheat—”

“The *Lady* of *Agriculture,*” she insists. “And I’m not summoning her cereal.”

“But you could, right?”

“I’ve never understood why pastries were allowed for breakfast and muffins aren’t,” I say, mostly to myself.

“It’s pure sugar!” Dad rages.

“Look, I haven’t had breakfast in weeks, all right?”

“Why haven’t you had breakfast?”

The room goes quiet. Hades is standing in the doorway.

“Luliver—” starts Emetria, striding over.

I reach him before she does. “Are you ready to be up?”

Hades doesn’t answer me. Instead he looks over my shoulder at Dad, standing by the breakfast bar. His eyes widen.

“Hello sir,” he says shakily. “I’m really sorry about that time I glamoured you and stole your daughter away to the Underworld. I didn’t do anything to her, I swear!”

Dad smiles. “That’s all right, lad. I know you did it to protect her. It’s been explained.”

“Oh good. Because I swear to you I’d never—”

Dad walks across the room and squeezes him by the shoulder. “It’s all right, son. I understand. How are you doing?”

Hades looks like he might cry. His breath increases, and he goes a bit wobbly on his legs. Emetria and I both sweep under his arms.

“Let’s get you back to bed,” Emetria says. “We don’t need to rush anything.”

Hades opens his mouth like he wants to object, but of course, he can’t. He doesn’t say anything at all as we steer him back to his room. Emetria checks over his wounds with careful fingers.

“All healing nicely,” she tells him. “How else are you feeling?”

Hades doesn’t answer.

“You need to tell us,” she says. “We’re hardly going to judge you.”

“Um, faint,” he says. “Headachey. A bit hot. And I was sick in the night.”

Emetria frowns. “Any cramping?”

“Some.”

She inspects his eyes. “One moment,” she says, and goes to grab her basket. She’s back before I can panic too much, pressing a gold instrument

to his wrist. She pricks his finger and tastes the droplet of blood.

"You've been poisoned," she says swiftly. "Slowly, over a long period of time."

My heart lurches.

"Well, that's troubling," says Hades blinking, as if this hardly matters at all.

"*Troubling?"* I shriek. I cast a desperate look at Emetria. "Is he going to be all right?"

"You should be fine after a few days," she says, my heart simmering. "Once it's out of his system."

"But who would want to poison him?"

"Rhea, probably," he says. "She was the one that brought my food. She was actually quite nice. Thought they deserved to be down there. She was probably trying to put me out of my misery, or stop me from opening the gate."

Emetria places a hand to his cheek. "Eat if you can," she says. "Drink. Rest. Your body will heal. And the rest… the rest *will* follow, Luliver. Trust me. We'll handle everything in the meantime."

He doesn't respond, not even when she kisses his head and leaves the room. We lie down against the bed, curling against each other. I kiss whatever parts of him I touch, and try not to think about the poison in his system, and how much longer he would have lasted down there if we hadn't got him out, how close I came to losing him.

He asks me about the goblin in the kitchen, and I tell him about everything that's happened, every trip and excursion, to allying with Valerian, a decision he approves of.

"Anything else I need to know?" he asks eventually.

"Yes," I say. "Emetria loves you. Before I left, she asked me to let you know, if we found you but we couldn't make it out, that she loved you almost as much as her own child. That she had for years. I don't… I don't know why she didn't tell you before."

For a moment, Hades is quiet. "I think she found it hard, after you, to talk about that sort of thing with anyone," he explains. "She can act, but she can't speak the real things, only shelve them. I think that's why I never knew, no matter how kind she was. We're so used to people pretending."

"Words are important."

"Yes."

"Hades?"

“Yes?”

“*I* love you.”

He smiles.

“I’m going to keep saying it until you get sick of it.”

He slides his mouth down to my neck and kisses me, murmuring against my skin. “You have ten years to catch up on. You might have to say it a few more times.” He hesitates. “Why haven’t you had breakfast in weeks?”

I raise an eyebrow. “You need me to answer that?”

“Please.”

“Well, I’m sure some people have healthier responses to their mate being sucked down into the deepest bowels of hell, but I’m afraid to say I’ve been a bit of a mess these past few weeks. Not eating… being mean… accidentally setting fire to things…”

I wait for him to admonish me, or ask for more details, but he doesn’t. He blinks. “Mate?”

I look down, my cheeks hot. “Boyfriend doesn’t really cut it any more,” I tell him. “I need something a bit more… *more.* A word that says, ‘you, you, always you’. A word that says my soul is tangled up in yours.” I grab his hands and kiss his fingers. “You’re *mine,* Luliver,” I tell him. “And I am yours. My heart is your heart. My very existence is tethered to yours, and I’m sorry for what it took to see it, to know it, to feel beyond a shadow of a doubt that there is no death for me but yours…”

My voice seizes up after that, and I think his does too, because he doesn’t say anything, and when he kisses me, our tears mingle. His hands glide through the fabric of my dressing gown until he finds my skin, soft and claiming. They don’t go anywhere else, but stay there, pinning me against him as the tears melt beneath the kissing.

We stay in that room for another two days, fixing his body and our own shredded hearts. He's sick a few more times, but he manages to get more down than he gets up. Emetria plies him with potions, things to fight off the aftereffects, to help him gain strength. His wounds heal, his eyes get brighter, his kisses harder. We don't do anything more, barely even talk about it. There's so little strength in him to begin with that I'm not sure he could manage it no matter how much we both want it.

"I want to," he insists. "I just need… a little more time."

"We've got time," I tell him. "Don't worry. Don't worry about *anything*."

The only things we allow to break our bubble is Emetria when she brings medicine, and Pandora and the dogs. We lie together in the bed and don't even think about moving.

"Let's ignore the outside world forever," he murmurs into me one night. "Let's just stay here, you and me. Or run away together somewhere equally remote."

"An excellent plan," I concur. "Not a thing wrong with it at all."

He claims my fingers, weaving them into his. "Sarcasm?"

I breathe carefully. "There is nothing I want more in the world than to sink into oblivion with you."

"But?"

"We have responsibilities. *I* have responsibilities. I promised Emetria and Artemis I'd help them if I got you back." *People died getting you back. I have to make up for that.* "I made mistakes," I tell him. "I can't abandon them now."

"I understand that." He rolls onto his back, still holding my hand, staring up at the ceiling. "I will help, too."

"I know you will."

"Sephy?"

"Yeah?"

"It's not your fault. What happened. None of it."

I don’t want to lie to him, so I say nothing.

There’s a knock on the door. “Um, Your Majesty?” says an uncertain voice. Medusa. “There’s a small matter requiring your attention.”

It was too much to hope that we could remain undisturbed for much longer. I sigh, rolling off the bed, glamouring myself a dove-grey gown coated in moths. It hides the fact I’ve been undressed and mostly naked for three days straight, wrapped up against him, skin on skin.

“Yes?” I say, opening the door.

She’s swapped her rough leathers for the elegant, woven tunic worn by most of the hunters. It jars with the sunglasses someone has given her to dispel her gorgon’s gaze. I remember my promise to make her a veil, or find a more permanent fix, and remind myself to make good on it.

“There’s a few stray spirits that require your attention,” she says. “We’ve managed to round them up in one location, but…”

“I understand.” Only a Hades can converse with them, or defeat them if they turn into a wraith. If that happens… the soul is lost forever. “I’ll be with you in a moment.”

I turn to the wardrobe to dress myself properly. Hades follows me in. There’s a brief smile when he sees our clothes hanging up together.

“You’re going out?” he asks.

“Duty calls.”

“I’m coming with you.”

“You’re not well enough.”

“Let me be the judge of that.”

I raise an eyebrow. “You’re only saying that because you can’t say ‘I am’.”

“I—” He stops. “I don’t want to be apart from you,” he says instead. “And I have to leave this room eventually.”

“Hmm,” I say. “Do you remember when you were wounded before?”

“When you first kissed me and we spent days together in bed? Beautiful memories.”

“I was thinking more when I told you that you were only allowed to leave the bed when you could make out with me without wincing.”

Hades grabs me by the waist and yanks me into his arms, tumbling back out of the closet and pinning me against the wall. His hands slide up my thighs, his mouth hot on mine. It’s a desperate, wild, yearning kiss, a match amongst the hay. I’m undone and unwound, a breaking tide against the dam. I don’t ever want to leave his lips, and when he moves his mouth down to

my neck, I grab a fistful of his hair and force him back to my mouth, wriggling out of grasp to shove him back against the mattress where we kiss, and kiss, and kiss… folding into some black, hot, shapeless space I don't ever want to emerge from.

"Point made," I breathe, my voice ragged. If I don't stop, we're going to destroy each other.

Hades grins underneath me, and we help each other dress.

It's a while before we meet Medusa by the door.

"You took your time," she says. "And why are your lips all red?"

"No reason," I say.

"He coming with us?"

"Yup."

She shrugs, but says nothing.

Out in the open, Hades walks to the edge of the bank, and stops. He closes his eyes for a moment.

"Where are the spirits?" he asks Medusa.

"Not far from the Core," she says. "Why—"

He spreads his wings, whatever passes for a breeze here ruffling through his feathers. I pick out purples and greens amidst the blacks, and spots that look… off, to me, the feathers bent as if the muscles beneath them are lumpy. I remember my dream of him, the bolts clean through them.

"I'm going to fly there," he says. "Will you meet us?"

Medusa raises an eyebrow. "I don't know how fast you think I slither, but—"

He leaps off over the Styx, and I understand why he wanted to come. I give Medusa a parting nod and soar off after him. For all he said he didn't want to leave my side, he barely seems to notice I'm there. I duck in and out of his shadow as he weaves through cavern after cavern, not going the most direct route, but going everywhere, seeing everything, letting the tips of his wings trail across the water.

Eventually, he stops, gliding to a nearby bank, still apart from his chest as he folds his wings behind him, not quite willing to let them go just yet.

"I wasn't sure I'd get to do that again," he says.

I say nothing, standing still beside him.

"They broke my wings," he said. "Again, and again. To the point where I wondered if they would ever heal. They kept them nailed above me so I couldn't rest, thrilled that I had another two limbs that they could experiment with."

Two hot tears slide down my cheeks. I press myself into his back, my fingers seeking out the knotted flesh behind his broken feathers. I lift my own wings and wrap them around him, so that he's almost encased in a feathery shell of bronze.

"You look good with wings," he whispers.

"Perhaps I should thank you for them."

"I didn't give you anything that was not already yours." He pauses. "Persephone, I—"

"Yes?"

"I'm looking for another way to tell you that I love you." He turns in my arms, resting against my forehead.

"You don't need one," I insist, and bring his mouth to mine.

Someone moves in the corner of the cavern.

"Ah, Lady Persephone," says a smooth, familiar voice, apparently seeing only the bronze of my wings and not Hades wrapped up inside them. "I was wondering when—"

I drop my wings away. Charon is standing by the mouth of the cave, utterly silent when his gaze falls on Hades.

Hades stiffens, all colour leaching from his face. "You. What are you doing here?"

"My Lord," he says, dropping to his knees, "I didn't know—"

"Didn't know *what?*" His voice is strange, tremulous, halfway between anger and fear, a roar made of glass. "Didn't know what they would do? To her? To *me?*"

"I didn't know *anything,*" he barrels on. "I didn't know what I know now, what it is to feel—"

"Then I shall teach you." Hades charges forwards. I grab his arm, but he shucks me off. I have a flash of the person he was, of what he can do, and I'm scared. I don't want him to fall into that hole again.

I dive between the two of them, wings outstretched like a shield. "No," I tell him. "You can't. Please."

Hades' eyes widen. "You'd defend him?"

"He's suffered for what he's done."

"*I* suffered for it. *You* did."

"But it's my fault too." My voice trembles. "I went out. I listened. I didn't run when you told me to. Would you hate me for that?"

"You know I don't. It isn't your fault. He knew what he was doing—"

“But he didn’t,” I insist. “How can you know anything when you feel nothing?”

“Sephone…”

“Don’t hurt him,” I beg. “It isn’t you. You don’t delight in hurting people. You don’t.”

Hades’ throat trembles. “I did, once.”

“Don’t be that person again. You aren’t that person. You aren’t.” I step towards him.

He leans against me, sucking in a breath. I know I’ve reached him. He clings to me as his wrath subsides. “All right,” he says. “All right.”

Charon wisely shrinks away. Medusa arrives not long after. “Where’s Charon?”

“The monster saw fit to depart,” Hades spits.

Medusa prickles at this, but I shake my head at her. There will be time to explain, later.

We descend into the cave where we find the wandering spirits, and one by one, convince them to return to the river. There’s something different in the way he speaks to them now, a brittle quality to his pleas, and I wonder tremulously if a little part of him isn’t enticed by the idea of nothingness over rest. Or perhaps it’s just hard to sound solid when you’re treading shaky ground.

He’s silent all the way home.

“Are you angry with me?” I ask as we approach the doors.

“I am angry with myself,” he replies. “I am angry, and sick, and shaken, and the reminder that you are ten times the person I am is not what I needed.”

I bite my lip, and grab his sleeve. “We have had this discussion before,” I tell him. “And you are wrong. And when *I* first saw him after what he did, I wanted to hurt him too.”

“Why didn’t you?”

“Because I never feel less like myself than when I feel that way,” I explain. “And there *have* been moments when I enjoy it, too. And I hate myself a little for that as well. It isn’t easy. Stop giving me credit and giving yourself none. You get to be angry and lost and afraid and upset. You get to feel whatever you feel.”

He snaps round to face me. “And what if I always feel this way? Will you love me then?”

“It’s only been a few days—”

He turns back around.

“But yes,” I tell his back. “I will still love you, then. I will love you until you are dust in the air, until I’m a dried husk, until the world is smoke and ruin. I will love you at your lowest and your worst. I will love you when you are broken and will go to my grave believing you can be fixed.” I pause. “Sometimes I worry you can only see the light in me, but I see all your darkness, all your scars, and I love every inch of you regardless.”

Hades is still. “When you show me your darkness,” he says eventually, “I promise I will love you anyway. There is nothing you could say that would stop me from loving you.”

The weight of this statement twitters in the air around us, and I want it dispersed. Want to be, just for a moment, the people we were before, together. “I really don’t like the colour black,” I tell him.

He barks a laugh, and we walk back hand-in-hand, with jokes of dyeing hair and redoing bedrooms.

Emetria fusses and twitters that Hades decided to leave the palace without first being given the all-clear by her, but she agrees that he seems to be on the mend and says he's welcome to do whatever he wishes.

"I'm the king of hell, apparently!" he snaps. "What were you going to do? Tie me to bed?"

"If needs be."

"About that," says Artemis, overhearing the conversation, "The king of hell part, not the bed tying. How does that work? Because Apollo and I both went to Tartarus and neither of our successors started developing powers."

"That's… a good point," says Emetria, staring at the half marks on our arms as if she expects the answer to leap out at her.

I think about how I showed no signs of being fae until I came down here, until I started to fall for him. I think about our shared names.

There is nothing I have given you that wasn't already yours.

"Sephy?" Emetria asks. "Do you have any ideas?"

"Nope, none at all," I say, blushing furiously.

"She's lying," says Hades. "But don't make her tell you."

Artemis shrugs. "I suppose it doesn't really matter. I was merely curious."

We go back to our room. Hades reclines in the chair beside the empty fire, thumbing the dogs' ears. Pandora winds herself around his calf. "I know I told the others not to ask," he says, "but *I* should like your theory, if you don't mind sharing."

"You really don't know?"

"I have my own idea, but I should like to hear yours."

I slide onto the armrest and coax out his hand, lying our forearms together so that the marks mirror one another. "I've a couple," I tell him.

"Go on."

"Well, one, you *wanted* me to have the power. You can transfer it over, right? Retire from the position? This was a version of that. Maybe it would have worked completely, had I not been desperately holding on to you."

He smiles faintly at this, tracing the feather against my skin. “A nice idea.”

“The other is that, well, we belong together,” I tell him. “I don’t know if my true name existed before or after I’d given myself to you, and, you know, vice versa, but there’s a reason it’s ours. Fate exists in this world, and I’m happy to bow to the path of destiny if it brought me to you. I never used to like the idea of destiny, like it sucked away your free will, but I would have chosen you anyway. I *did* choose you anyway.” I fall into him, slowly and carefully, inching onto his lap and gliding my hands along the back of his neck, into his hair. “We belong together, Luliver Edelvard Lore.”

He leans his forehead against mine, half trembling, his fingers tight against my back. “I thought that from the moment we met, felt it so hard I thought I’d die without it being returned.” He pauses, breathing hard. “So it’s nice to hear that it is, and that you agree.”

We slot together, kissing for a while, slow and light and long. He draws circles on the exposed skin of my back as I nuzzle down against him, inhaling the cool aroma of his skin, peppermint and sea salt. His throat pulses against my nose.

He gazes over the furniture, still stroking my back. “So, you really don’t like black, huh?”

I tilt my chin to face him. “You’ve *seen* my bedroom.”

He chuckles softly. “I can’t say I’m exactly a frills and lace guy…”

“Wouldn’t find you so hot if you were.”

“We should redecorate.”

I blink. “You serious?”

“I want you to be comfortable here.”

I kiss his neck. “I am comfortable.”

“Sephy, you love the sunlight to the point of feeling sick without it, and you’ve spent weeks holed up in a dark room. Don’t pretend you like it.”

“All right,” I say. “Let’s find something that works for us both. No black furniture. Or red velvet.”

“Fine. No pink.”

“No pink…! No, no, it’s fine. I can compromise. But I want clouds and sunlight on the ceiling.”

“But the stars—”

“Can come out at night.”

Hades smiles. “I like that idea. I like that idea a lot.”

For the better part of an hour, we snap and change the room, altering it to something lighter. We keep the windows half stained glass, half clear, with an image of a meadow swirling beyond. Everything is brighter, but we settle on a dark blue for the walls. Gossamer drapes hang on the bed. Gone are the black silk sheets, replaced with something soft and warm.

It's nothing like the bedroom of my girlhood, but it feels like mine.

And his, too.

Someone knocks on the door. "Are you naked?" comes Libby's voice.

"Alas, we're fully clothed," replies Hades.

Libby clicks open the door, casting her eyes around approvingly. She says nothing else, her gaze settling on Hades. "I heard you were up and about. You ready for visitors yet? I've got to do the preliminary interrogations."

Hades' eyes flicker. "Interrogations?"

"Um, Libby?" I interrupt. "Possibly a poor choice of words."

"Oh, yeah, shit, sorry. What I mean to say is, can I invite myself in? I brought wine." She holds up a bottle of red. "This looks good."

"That's an eighty-year-old bottle from Le Marche," Hades says flatly. "It's not good, it's exquisite."

"Want me to find something cheaper?"

"Spirits, no," he says, clicking his fingers and summoning three goblets. "Please come on in."

I take the wine and pour out three measures. It's mortal wine, so I give Libby the bigger measure.

"You're too kind," she says, grinning as she settles into one of the wingback chairs. Hades and I settle into the other, and I wait for Libby to tease me about sitting in his lap, but she's far too interested in the wine.

"God, that's good. Worth coming here just for the wine."

Hades takes a long sip. I try not to watch his lips as he drinks, or the way his long fingers cradle the goblet. He's painted his nails again. I know I teased him about not liking black, but I've missed that about him.

"Mmm," he says slowly. "I agree."

I take a sip. "It's all right."

Libby and Hades both glare at me.

"Why are you friends with her?" Hades asks Libby, as if he's not the one dating me. Or whatever it is we're doing, slowly affixing our souls to one another more and more, day by day.

"It's a good story, actually," says Libby.

Hades' eyes brighten. It's a strange kind of brightness, half put on. His eyes haven't quite regained their former lustre yet. He's trying. I just hope he isn't trying too hard.

Libby takes a long drink. "I'm friends with her because of this time she defended me from this asshole called Kyle Davis."

I freeze. I thought I knew the story of how Libby and I became friends, how we met at a self-defence class my father forced me to go to, how she beat me every time but learnt to like me anyway. I had no idea there was a specific moment she could pin it on, and certainly not this one. "I didn't know you knew about that," I say quietly.

"I saw the whole thing."

"What happened?" Hades asks.

"It's nothing—"

"Kyle Davis was this ass we knew back from the self-defence class where we met," Libby continues. "While he thought I was out of earshot—and therefore I couldn't deck him myself—he said to his friends, 'why is she even coming here? Can't her dad teach her how to be a terrorist himself? Or are only the men allowed to learn how to fight?'—because no racism is complete without a healthy dose of sexism too—"

"Lib—"

"Anyways, Sephy heard and she just looked him dead in the eyes and said, 'you're an arsehole, and one day someone's going to punch you because of it and I just hope I'm around to see it.' It was awesome. I could sit here and yell 'white saviour' because God knows I can fight my own battles, but honestly, I was just impressed. I thought she was a bit bland until then. I didn't even know she knew what an arsehole was… other than the obvious. But there she was, taking absolutely no crap from this guy."

Hades smiles, his fingers grazing the small of my back. "That's my girl."

"Mine too," says Libby, just as fondly. "But it gets better. Anyway, she starts to walk away, and he says something else, really low, under his breath, and Sephy just turns around and smacks him straight in the nose. It was beautiful. And everyone laughed because no one really likes guys like Kyle, they just don't know what to say to them." She downs the rest of her wine. "Anyway, that's when I knew we would be friends."

She's grinning, but I don't like the story. I hated Kyle for saying those things. I hated myself for losing my temper. And I hate remembering what Kyle said.

But I don't want to drag down the mood, so I smile along with them, drink my wine, and giggle when Hades shares his story about nearly drowning in the Styx. Libby and I regale him with tales of our childhood, of dumb things our mutual friends did, of the crap Libby has pulled and the lies we've enacted over the years to get her out of it.

Dumb, silly, fleeting stuff.

We talk for over an hour, and I forget everything outside the room. There's an easiness that hasn't been here for a long while, and if pain exists, it's plastered over. The laughter feels real.

Finally, after a second bottle of wine is finished, Libby departs. She's drunk enough to braid our hair together, "because we're connected!" and tell Hades he's awesome, but steady enough to undo the braid before she gets up and doesn't stumble on her way to the door.

Hades and I undress and crawl into bed, shuffling into each other's arms. I lie against his chest, listening to the beat of his heart as he winds his fingers through my curls.

"What did Kyle say to you?" he asks quietly.

"It doesn't matter—"

"'Sephone. Please."

I sigh, summoning my courage. "He said, 'no wonder your mother left you.'"

Hades tenses.

"I know, I know. I should really be over the whole, 'I grew up thinking my mother didn't love me' trauma…"

I wait for him to tell me that his childhood was worse, to say light-heartedly at least I know differently now, but of course he doesn't.

"I'm not sure it ever really goes," he says instead. "Even when there's other, better love. Even when there are reasons. Even when it shouldn't matter. It does. It's a scar. It doesn't go anywhere. We can choose to ignore it, or embrace it. We can let it not matter. But it's there."

I think of the literal scars his mother inflicted upon him, my own back twitching subconsciously. I haven't forgotten how much I want to kill her. He isn't angry at her, not like me.

When you show me your darkness, I promise I will love you anyway.

"I think I want to kill your mother," I tell him.

There's a long pause. "OK…"

"That's it? OK? That's all you've got?"

"I mean, I understand the urge."

“Do you?” I shift onto my knees and stare at him. “Do you honestly want her dead?”

He shrugs. “I’m not sure.”

“You see, I am. I don’t see any other way of ending this, but I want her dead just because of what she’s done to you. I want to hurt her. It’s not me. I don’t *want* to want it. But I do. I really do. I want her to suffer and I want to be the one to do it.”

“I won’t judge you,” he says. “Or stop you. If you want to be stopped.”

I don’t know what I want, there.

But I do want her dead, and that’s never going to change.

Tears spring behind my eyes. “How can you be all right with me wanting to kill someone? To kill your own *mother*?”

Hades thumbs my cheeks. “She’s a really terrible mother,” he says. “And you’re a good person. This doesn’t negate that.”

“I don’t feel like a good person most of the time.”

“No good person feels like a good person most of the time,” he says. “Or so I hear. Not much experience in that department.”

I smile a little at this, and curl back down in his arms. He is quiet, unreadably so.

“How are you doing?” I ask him.

His breath stills for a moment. “I’m getting there.”

*

The next day, we’re summoned for breakfast in the newly-kitted out official war room. I don’t know if Hades designed it specifically, or if came with the palace, merely tucked out of sight until it was needed. It’s carved out of the same black obsidian with the over-the-top drapes that used to inhabit his room. All of the chairs are ebony with red velvet cushions, apart from two golden thrones, tucked beside one another.

We’re updated on any developments, which are thankly minimal. It’s a strange atmosphere. Many of the party are more animated than ever. Artemis cracks three whole smiles (two at Libby) but Emetria looks exhausted despite her weary grin. Peony too, usually one of the most cheerful, is oddly subdued. She only laughs at one of Apollo’s jokes.

Whenever Hades gets bored or overwhelmed, he twirls his fingers almost imperceptibly, and changes the engravings on people’s seats. He adds rows of waving wheat to Emetria’s, scrolls and books to my father’s, suns to Apollo’s and some rather disastrous battle scenes to Artemis’ where she’s chased by the animals she’s hunting. Everyone pretends not to notice,

although Libby gasps rapturously when a figure of her wielding a spear appears on her armrest. Her fingers move to her hip, where her phone used to be kept, but of course she's stopped carrying it now.

Hades twitches throughout, and I can tell he's anxious about being among so many people, so quickly. He didn't like crowds before.

I squeeze his hand against his thigh, and wish I was able to communicate with him through my mind.

"On a more pleasant note, we need to organise some festivities," Irma announces, as the meeting draws to a close.

Hades groans. "Why?"

"Because morale is low and we could be dead by tomorrow?" offers Artemis.

"Stirring speech as ever."

Artemis glares at him.

"Yes, morale is a little on the low side," Irma agrees. "But we also ought to honour Valerian's allying with us, and it's Beltane in a few days."

He blinks. "Is it?"

Emetria shifts uncomfortably. Beltane—the first of May—is the one day a year she used to spend with me.

It's the anniversary of the day Hades and I first met.

"You'll be expected to participate at the start," Irma says. "You can slink off afterwards, if you like."

I've not read a great deal about how faeries actually celebrate it, but I'm fairly sure it's from dawn to dusk and ends in an orgy.

I blush at the thought.

"Sure," says Hades. "Whatever I need to do."

Something brushes against our legs. Used to the presence of Diana during our meetings by now, I ignore it. Hades flinches, peering under the table. He frowns at the room.

"There appears to be a small child under the table," he says. "Would anyone like to lay claim to it or shall I assume that it is, in fact, a very attractive goblin?"

Artemis scowls at him. "She's mine. Diana."

"You have a child?"

"Clearly."

"And what unfortunate soul did you ensnare into breeding with you?"

"Bite me."

"I'd rather not. I don't know where you've been."

Artemis hurls an apple in his direction, but he catches it deftly in his elegant fingers and slides under the table. At first, I think he's just shielding himself from another attack, but he doesn't come back up.

"Hades? Are you all right down there?"

"Quite fine." He leans against my legs. "Lovely view…"

Dad coughs uncomfortably, and I bite my lip, squishing Hades' head between my legs and trying not to blush or laugh. Artemis groans, but she says nothing. Neither does she check on what Hades could be doing under the table with her daughter. She trusts him in some ways, at least.

He's still there when the meeting ends, even after Diana has trailed away after her mother, a fat piece of duck-shaped apple clutched in her fist.

"You can come out now," I tell him.

"Can you… can you maybe just get down here for a bit?"

I don't reply. I just slide out of my seat and onto the floor. Hades lies against my lap and closes his eyes. We sit there for a while in silence.

"I used to crawl under tables a lot at revels. It's oddly comforting."

I can't think of what to say to this.

"We first met on Beltane," he continues.

"I know."

"It's also the three-year anniversary of me killing my father and becoming Lord of Hell."

At this, I swear. No wonder Emetria looked uncomfortable. Hades glances at me. I don't swear often. He says nothing about it, though. He just carries on.

"At least, I think it is. It was night time when Emetria came to get me. It could have been past midnight. Wasn't exactly looking at the clock." He goes silent for a moment. "I *hope* it was past midnight. I liked that being our day."

"We… we won't stay long. We'll do the king-and-queen thing and sneak away. Go back to our room. Eat cake. Watch a film."

He smiles. "King-and-queen thing…"

"What?"

"You're my queen." He grins into my lap. "Feels like we skipped a step."

"I think we skipped a few steps, actually."

He runs a hand under my skirt. "We could rectify that."

"I am *not* having sex with you for the first time under a table."

"Where would you *like* to have sex with me for the first time?"

I blink at him. “You’re serious?”

“When it comes to you? Always.”

I scuttle out from under the table and drag him back into our room, barking at the lights to dim. I steer him towards the bed and yank his shirt over his head, revealing perfect skin and scars. Flat against the mattress, his eyes widen as I struggle with the laces on my dress.

“You don’t want to wait and… I don’t know, have dinner first?” he offers. “I could summon rose petals and candles or—”

“I don’t need that. I don’t need any of it. I don’t need anything but you. If you’re ready—”

“I’m ready,” he says, his eyes black and shining with desire.

“Then rip me out of this dress.”

“You… you’re serious?”

“Do it.” It will probably fix itself, and even if it doesn’t, it’ll be utterly worth it for the seconds it spares me without his skin on mine. He seizes the panels obediently and tears them from my chest, bringing his mouth down against my exposed flesh. I let out a sound between a whisper and a moan, and he pulls me flat against himself.

I kiss him wildly, desperately. I can hear his heartbeat over mine.

Mine, mine, mine. All mine.

He rolls me over onto my back and inches upwards, so that I can see his face. He strokes my cheek. “I love you, Persephone,” he says. “I love you so much.”

My heart breathes. Even now, it seems impossible, that I am beyond lucky to have found him. He could whisper the word until it was shadow and smoke and it would never shake the meaning.

I open my mouth to repeat the sentiment, wondering if I can cast some kind of glamour to make it soar, to pack some spectacle into its beautiful simplicity.

The dogs—which we somehow completely forgot were still in the room—leap up onto the bed before I can, splitting us apart with their noisy, slobbery faces.

There’s half a second when I almost laugh, remembering a time when Pandora did something similar. I’m already reaching across to tug them away, not willing to let this moment go, when I realise Hades isn’t beside me. He’s scrambled off the bed, pressed against the wall, breathing in hard, ragged breaths. His face is a picture of panic.

“Hades?”

His eyes are wide and awful, like the room has folded away from him, like he can't hear me at all, like he's elsewhere, lost, far away.

But the dogs have jumped up on him a hundred times before—

Too late I remember that he was forced to fight in that arena, that having a face full of fang thrown at you, no matter who they belonged to, could conjure up a plethora of memories.

Did he leap away to protect them, or himself?

"Luliver," I whisper, creeping towards him.

His breathing starts to slow. "I'm sorry," he says. "I'm so, so sorry…"

The dogs slide to the floor, whimpering, crawling over on their belly. They press their muzzles against his lap, begging for forgiveness.

"I'm sorry," he says, as the tears slide freely down his cheeks. "I'm so sorry, you didn't… it's not your fault… I'm sorry, I'm sorry, Sephy, I'm—"

"No, no, you don't have to be sorry, it's fine." I reach across, tugging him into my arms, holding him against my chest. I unfurl my wings and wrap them around him. "You're safe," I whisper. "I've got you. Don't worry about anything. I'm here. I'm here, you're fine."

In the middle of the night, when we're both treading the place between sleep and unconsciousness, Hades whispers in the dark, "Sometimes they'd drug me so I'd fall into a really deep sleep. The first time they did it, I remember feeling grateful as I slipped away, grateful for the rest, for a moment of reprieve, a chance to feel nothing. Then I woke up in the arena already under attack." He takes a breath, long and careful. "I learnt to fear the rest, but sometimes… sometimes I prayed they'd give me too much, or that I wouldn't wake up before the beasts had finished the job…" He stops again, composing himself. "Apparently it was more fun that way, to watch me scream myself upright. They laughed a lot. Sometimes I think they did it because when they dragged me in awake… I didn't always fight. I knew they wanted me alive so I'd see how far they were willing to take it… but when I woke up in the midst of it, I'd always fight. Instinct is funny."

Nothing about any of this is funny, and for a moment, I struggle to find my voice, fighting against the cold, hard rage I feel towards these people**.** I wish I could kill them.

"You don't have to say anything," he tells me.

I reach for him over the mattress, the thin gap between us all too wide, and cling to him. "Thank you."

"For what?"

"Not giving up. Holding on even when you didn't think we were coming for you." I stroke his hair. "I'm sorry you didn't know that before, but know it now. I will always come for you."

He claims my fingers. "And I, you."

There's quite a collection of vows we're making to one another. I wish there was a way to bottle them up and bind them into one. But, like Hades says, we've missed a few steps. I'm sure we'll get through them all in time, if we live long enough.

If.

Hades slides his palm over my chest. "You're trembling."

“I find myself overcome with my dizzying attraction towards you to the extent that I cannot control my own body…”

“I know that humour,” he says, shaking his head. “I *invented* that humour. Come on. What’s wrong?”

“Can you just hold me and promise me everything will be fine, in the end?”

He sighs. “I can do one of those things,” he says, and draws me into his arms.

“We’ll be fine,” I whisper into his chest. “Everything will be fine.”

“Persephone says everything will be fine,” he returns. “And there are no better lips to listen to.” He presses his own against them. “Although they have a fine number of other uses…”

I swat him gently on the chest, and then crawl back into him, further than before. “I missed you,” I say, not just talking about him now, but the rest, the fragmented parts of himself I was worried he might have left behind in the pit. I breathe in his skin; apple spice, faint sweat, *him.*

“I know,” he says, and nothing else. We kiss into the dark until exhaustion takes over, woken only once more by nightmares.

*

Preparations begin for Beltane. Irma has everyone helping, building bonfires in the gardens, making garlands of flowers, transforming the gloomy throne room into a festival of spring. Almost every inch of the ceiling is covered in petals.

I make Medusa the veil I promised, and a wreath of never-fading flowers to go with it.

“No one has ever given me flowers before,” she says when I present it to her, “not since I became like this.”

“I am sure someone will give you flowers again.”

“Not while I can petrify them, alas.”

“I can glamour you again—”

“Someday I may take you up on that,” she says. “But not right now. I’d like to have my gaze with me whilst we’re at war.”

“Good point.”

Banquet tables are laid with cloths of shimmering gold. Musicians practise daily, filling the halls with sweet, lilting music.

I try not to miss Willa’s voice among them, or Hazel’s pipes.

I wonder if his was the betrayal the Oracle spoke of, a betrayal that didn’t feel like one, because he was trying to save us even if it meant killing

me. It doesn't fill me with much solace, but it's a thought that lingers nonetheless.

On the day before the festival begins, I catch Peony in front of the magic mirror, our doorway to the world outside. I've not yet spoken to her since we returned from Tartarus, not even thanked her. It seems too long has passed now for my gratitude to hold the same weight, but I make a moment for her, sliding in beside her.

She's watching London, a newsreel from the past few years, riots and burning buildings and chaos. Tears are pooling down her cheeks.

"Hyde Park's a better bet," I tell her.

She turns towards me sharply. "I'm sorry?"

"If you're reminiscing about the city you knew, just look at the park. It's better than all of… this."

She pauses, as if gathering her words. "I've been out of the loop for a long time. I didn't know… what was going on outside."

"Almost makes you wonder if Zera has a point, doesn't it?"

"Do you think she might?"

"Do I think the world might be better off with less humans in it? Yeah." It's hard to disagree with that. "Do I think mass genocide is the answer? No." I shake my head. "Zera isn't the answer. She can't be."

"What do you see in humanity?" she asks.

There's a strange bluntness to her question, as if she's forgotten she's human at all. I wonder, if I live to be a hundred, if I'll stop seeing myself as one of them too. "I see space for improvement," I say carefully, "but I see something worth protecting, worth preserving."

Peony looks down, and I think she wants to say something, but doesn't.

"Are you all right?" I ask.

She shrugs. "Are any of us?"

"Good point."

The bell rings for lunch, before I can pry any deeper, before I can worry if Hades isn't the only one who brought a part of the darkness of Tartarus back with him.

*

Beltane dawns, and at first light, we are up, starting the celebrations. I wear a gown of light green covered in a rainbow of flowers and butterflies, from my shoulders to toes. Hades wears a tunic of deepest viridian over a billowing white shirt. It's stitched with a pattern of thorns and roses.

I blink at him when he emerges from the closet.

“What is it?”

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen you wearing something not black or blue.”

“Yeah, well, don’t get too used to it.”

“Do I look good in black?” I ask him, briefly glamouring the black, gold feathered gown I wore in his exile.

His throat trembles. “Sephy, we have a festival to start, why are you doing this to me?”

I glamour my spring attire back again. “Sorry.”

“But you’re not, are you?”

“Not remotely, no.”

We grin at each other, and I slip my arm into his.

“For the record,” he says, as we leave the room, “you look good in everything. And nothing. You look excellent in *nothing*.”

We glide down the corridor, towards the throne room. Hunters and Unseelie alike bow as we pass them. Hades stiffens beside me, but we keep walking.

At the top of the dais sit two thrones, carved of wood and branch, so close together that the armrests join. They look moulded from the one piece, almost identical save the engravings. One is etched with blooms and buds, the other bones and feathers.

“Oh,” says Hades, smirking, “I wonder which one’s mine?”

When we take our seats, my flowers bloom, and the feathers of his shine ink-black.

“Impressive,” he comments, sounding every bit the king, and if something else shines behind those eyes or clutch of his fingers, no one but me notices it.

A court of faeries, Seelie and Unseelie, stretches before us. King Valerian rejected the invitation, citing that it was unwise to travel, to have so many in one place. He’s right. I wouldn’t want any visitors here, not right now.

Irma comes forward, and hands us both jeweled goblets, swirling with honeyed wine. It seems ridiculous to drink at dawn, but when in Rome…

A hundred faces stare at us, and I realise we’re expected to say something.

Hades’ fingers are white against the stem of his goblet. His mask is up; there’s half a reserved, careful smile on his face, but his throat is trembling, his body tight.

“Friends,” I say, rising to my feet without a second’s hesitation. “Hunters, rebels, Seelie and Unseelie… honoured guests, all. It is a privilege and a pleasure to host you in our court, in our home. I am sure I am not alone in being awed by the spectacular arrangements.”

There’s a nod of approval. I’m running out of things to say. I glance desperately at Emetria, who gestures to keep going. I hope I’m not expected to mention the orgy.

“We thank you all for your continued service, and hope the festivities today offer a glimpse at just how grateful we are. But let us not talk of war today. Let us not talk of anything at all. Instead, let us drink—”

“Here, here!” says Libby from the crowd, causing everyone to stare at her. “Oh, sorry. I thought that was the end of the speech. To drink!” she declares, raising her glass, knocking it back, and looking down in embarrassment.

I raise my goblet towards her. “To drink, and food, and merriment,” I add, hoping my cheeks don’t flush at the idea of the planned orgy. I raise my goblet again, this time in the direction of our Unseelie forces. “And to chaos and revelry.”

A cheer goes up, and our toasts are drunk. Musicians begin to pipe fine, soft music, as dainty as appleblossom. Everyone moves towards the banquet table. It’s stuffed with current bread, honeycakes, and fruit carved into shapes.

Hades materialises at my shoulder. I think he means to thank me, but I don’t want it.

“If we’re going to slip away,” I tell him, “I insist we take some of this food back with us.”

“We’re not going to slip away,” he says. “Yet. We owe our presence to these people. They’re risking their lives battling Zera while we… while *I*—”

“Don’t. Don’t you dare. You’ve done plenty already to stop her.”

He pales further, his fingers tapping restlessly against his leg. “I can’t hide forever.”

“You’re not hiding, you’re recovering.”

“It feels like it’s the same thing.”

“But it isn’t, and I’m afraid I must keep telling you that until you understand, or you’re all right again.” I can feel tears prickling at my eyelids, but I refuse to let them fall. I hand him an oatcake and a small bowl filled with peaches and cream. “So *eat.*”

He manages a smile “As my queen commands.”

He takes his food, and walks over to the crowd. I can almost see him bringing the mask back up, different from the old one he wore when he was playing the devil, but a mask nonetheless. I wonder how long he can wear it before the cracks start to form.

I wonder what he'd be, if not the King of Hell. I wonder what he'd do if he could be anything.

There was a time I didn't know what I wanted, only that I wanted to know. I had dreams of university, but not knowing what to study, dreams of friends I hadn't made yet, plays I hadn't been in, wonders I hadn't seen to dream of.

I know what I want, now.

I want Luliver well again. I want my friends and family safe. I want to meet Imogen's new baby. I want to go home, even if it doesn't feel like home.

I want to survive this, and be happy that I did. I want the future me to like the person she's become, and not be too ashamed of her past.

Am I asking the impossible?

I watch Hades valiantly pretending, and know of all the things I want, which one I desire most.

If I only get one wish, I give it to him. Make him sleep easily again. Make him whole and well. Let nothing ever happen to him again.

That, of course, I know to be impossible, but I pray for it nonetheless.

"Typically, one mentions new beginnings and new life at Beltane," Emetria says, appearing beside me with an empty plate, "but that certainly seems to have done the job."

"Thanks, I think."

"You're welcome, dearest," she says, and loads up on honeycakes before sweeping away behind the dais. I don't ask where she's going.

I pass from person to person, completing my courtly duties, plying people with praise and accepting their flattery. I dance when required, and Hades does too, although I see him less and less as the day wears on. Jugglers and singers and entertainers are summoned. I watch delicious shows of glamour and mortal sleight of hand. One person fills the room with glittering golden bubbles that spill petals like confetti when popped. A roast boar with apple and berry stuffing is served for lunch, and the bonfires are lit in the afternoon. Aphron leads a wild dance around them.

"When did they get here?" asks Hades.

"It's a long story," I tell him.

“I’ll tell it!” says Apollo, appearing out of nowhere with a tankard of mead, looping his arm over Hades’ shoulders. “Did Sephy tell you about fighting a kraken?”

It turns out I skipped over that part, and Hades listens to the story with equal parts amazement and horror.

“You could have *died!*” he exclaims.

“It didn’t have teeth.”

“It could have swallowed you!”

“Ah, but it didn’t.”

He rubs his eyes, glazed with weariness, and silently slips away.

Sometimes Hades creeps away like this and sometimes I go with him… He says he doesn’t mind if I stay, can tell I’m enjoying myself. And the truth is, I am. I like the spectacle, and I feel safe amongst these people in a way I never did at the Winter Solstice. I may not quite wear the crown as well as I might like, but the revelry speaks to me. The tame wildness.

I’m still skipping the orgy later, but the rest appeals.

Shortly after the fires are lit, I realise I’ve lost sight of Hades. He isn’t in his room, or anywhere else I’d expect him to be. I’m just about to panic when my eyes catch Emetria, and she points to the table. A long, wolfish tail peeks out from beneath it.

I slide beneath the tablecloth. Hades flinches when I appear, but only for a moment. He raises his hands to his lips. Diana is asleep in his arms, her fat pink cheek pressed against his chest. I wonder who climbed under here first.

“This is a sweet image.” I smile. “Quite cosy under here.”

He murmurs something non-committal. “I like children,” he says. “Particularly faerie ones. They’re so upfront because they haven’t learnt how to skirt around the truth yet. It’s refreshing. Been a while since any came near me, though. Big scary Lord of Night.”

“Yes, so scary, much terror.” I pause for a moment, gaze tight on the two of them. A question rises in my chest. It’s a big one, but probably one better asked sooner rather than later. “Whilst we’re on the subject…”

“Yes?”

“There’s not really anything you could say to me that would be a dealbreaker right now, but putting my cards on the table, I’d really like kids. You know, someday. And not like in a few decades/in the next century someday, assuming I’ve got longer to live that most. Because my dad

doesn't. I'd like him to meet my children. So maybe in ten years, or thereabouts. If… if you're game?"

Hades smiles, and everything about him is soft and warm. One long, black-polished finger is curled in Diana's fist. "I'm up for that." His voice is velvet and ember.

"How many would you like?"

"Faeries don't really get to decide, you know. We get what we're given."

"We could adopt. Steal away some human children. Isn't that what faeries do?"

He chuckles.

"Seriously, how many would you have, if you could choose?"

"I'd have loads," he says. "So they'd never be alone." *Like he was. Like I was*. "You?"

"Oh, three, max. Too much chaos, otherwise."

"We have a large enough house."

We allow ourselves a quiet moment to dream, to believe it, to not think about taking down Zera, or the bargains I've made, or the fact this conversation may be totally pointless, rolling away, smoke over water, and ridiculous for us to even be discussing. We've not even slept together. We could be dead before we get the chance.

My chest hurts, because I can imagine Luliver holding another child, one with his eyes, and finally finding them as beautiful as I do. I'm not sure I can cope with one day being never.

"'Sephone," he says softly, and I realise I'm halfway to tears. "Are you all right?"

"Will you come with me?"

He nods, his expression steely, and slowly slides Diana down onto a pillow beside him. He instructs the dogs to watch her, but as we slide out of the room, he tells another one of the hunters where she is, too.

"Where are we going?" he asks.

"Away from it all," I tell him. "You'll see."

We link our fingers together, and I drag him into the gardens, far away from the bonfires and the revelry, into the quiet, until we reach a glade of utter silence.

"Close your eyes."

Hades doesn't even ask why, doesn't move as I pull trees and roots, casting layers of soft, shimmering glamour.

“You can open them now.”

Hades’ eyes widen. Ahead of us is a bandstand, similar to the one in Hyde Park, but composed of branches and ivy and blooming buds.

I click my fingers, and it starts to rain. We race for shelter, our clothes humming with droplets. His pale skin shimmers like diamonds. I stare at him, wanting to kiss him almost as much as I just want to watch, to commit this image to memory.

I slide a hand to his cheek, and he kisses my palm. “I love you,” I breathe.

He smiles, his whole face brightening, as if it’s the first time I’ve ever spoken the words, as if I don’t whisper them daily, as if it doesn’t shimmer from my skin like starlight in the sky.

“Why?” he asks. “Why do you love me?”

It occurs to me that for all I’ve told him, I’ve never told him that. It would be easy to say that I just do, that he slipped into my heart inexplicably and irreplaceably, that the words barely exist to explain it. But I know he needs to know why. He needs to hear it to believe in it a little more, to understand it better.

“I think you’re genuinely the kindest, most thoughtful person I’ve ever met.”

He blinks at me like I’ve spoken pure nonsense.

“You stole my cat for me because you didn’t want me to be lonely, even though she scratched your hands to ribbons. You made me paper flowers when you could have conjured real ones. You calm the souls of the dead, not knowing if they can hear you. You wouldn’t let my dad miss me. And you don’t do any of it for praise, you do it because you know it’s the right thing to do, and you put far, far more kindness into the world than you’ve ever gotten out of it.” I pause for a moment. “An imbalance I aim to rectify. Just so you know.”

Hades leans himself against my shoulder, and stays there for a moment. “Just so you know, when I was nice to you, there was always a selfish part of me that did it so you would like me back.”

“Oh yeah? Then why did you send me that copy of Peter Pan for my birthday?”

He smirks into my neck. “I thought it would make you happy.”

“I had no idea who it was from! There’s no way I could have attached it to you! Just accept the fact that you’re a selfless, lovable arsehole.”

“Lovable arsehole?” He snorts. “We need to work on your terms of endearment.” He kisses my ear, drawing his lips along my jaw. “My love, my heart, my queen…” He presses a kiss against my mouth, long and slow and delicate, before leaning his forehead against mine. “I love you for your goodness, too, for your determination and strength. The fact that you’re also very funny and incredibly beautiful? Total bonus.”

“I forgot to mention your humour.”

“And…”

“You’re very pretty too, Hades.” I catch his mouth with mine. “Luliver,” I murmur, “my love, my darling, my dearest… I am never letting you go again.”

His kisses start soft, but they quickly turn hard. I wind my fingers into his hair and pull him down to the ground. I lie back against the grass, tugging him over me. I unlace his tunic and slide my hands under his shirt, around his back, gliding over scars and skin. He doesn’t tense. He pulls away only to haul off shirt and tunic in their entirety.

His skin glows in the soft light, each panel of him perfect.

I slide the sleeves off my dress and drop the bodice to my waist. His eyes widen, pupils blown like moulded glass, as I expose the flesh there, and his fingers go to it trembling, as if he’s never done anything like this before.

His kisses descend down my chest as I unwrap the layers dividing us, shucking off skirts and petticoats until I am lying naked in the grass above the remains of my dress.

I kick off my shoes. He kicks of his own, our gazes threaded together as he removes his breeches too. Every curve and every line of us is exposed, but our gazes remain locked together.

Hades kisses me, hands around my back, our eyes still open.

“You’re magnificent,” he says.

I tear my gaze away from him to trace a line from his thigh, across his stomach, up his chest to his perfect, wonderful face.

“You’re exquisite,” I tell him.

He claims my fingers. “You’re trembling. If you don’t want to—”

I squeeze his hands. “You’re trembling too.”

“I’m nervous.”

“We don’t have to—”

He kisses me again, harder, pressing me against the ground. “I want you,” he says.

“I want you, too.”

When our lips join again, it's like nothing else I've ever experienced. The trembling vanishes almost immediately, anchored by the weight of his body over mine, that warm and immeasurable heaviness. Fingers glide over me, lips on my flesh. His breath merges with mine. I touch every part of him, tracing hands and cheeks and thighs and chests and every glorious part in between.

"Are you giggling?" he asks.

"This is new to me!"

He brushes my mouth with his. "Honestly, it feels quite new to me too."

"You've been with others before," I say, although I feel guilty the moment I've said it because I'm not sure how many of those past encounters were what I would call consensual.

"Not like this," he says, his eyes on mine. "Nothing has ever been like this before."

We kiss more, longer, harder, the gap between use becoming smaller and smaller. I'm incredibly aware of how much he wants me, how much I want him.

But then, dimly, is the thought of what I *don't* want. Not yet.

"Wait."

Hades stops immediately. "What?"

"I don't want to get pregnant."

"Umm, faeries are very infertile," he says, blinking at me. "It's extremely unlikely—"

"Uh, no, not playing that game. It only takes the once. Can you summon a condom?"

He clicks his fingers. "Sure." A small silver square appears in his fingers. He fumbles with the package, shaking again. "I'm not… entirely sure what I'm doing. They always skip this part in the movies."

"I er, have a theoretical understanding—" I tease the package from his fingers. "Can't be too hard, right?"

"Why is it oily?"

I blush furiously, and splutter with laughter, giggling as we maneuver it into the right place and wishing more movies *did* include this part, because that one sex education class I had two years ago in school was not apt preparation. "Is it on right?"

"You tell me!"

That just makes me laugh more. I'm still laughing when he asks if we should stop, if the moment is over, if everything is too awkward now. I'm

still laughing when I pull his mouth back to mine, although my sounds die away when I rake my fingers down his back, only to be replaced by a new and different noise as he kisses my neck, his hands exploring new parts of me with careful, expert attention.

His breath is in my ear. His heartbeat thumps against my chest. I'm conscious of everything and nothing, of the soft swell of his lips, of beads of rain and sweat intermingling, of a hotness inside me, a tingling in my toes.

Everything around me is an illusion. He is the only real thing in the world.

My world.

"'Sephone," he murmurs. He hovers above me, waiting, inches away from being inside me. Less, less than that and far, far too far away.

"Don't stop," I tell him. "Don't you dare."

Afterwards, he lies against my shoulder, stroking the length of my hair. Our limbs are tangled together. We've summoned a blanket. His back lies half-exposed to the air, and I'm tracing lines along the curves of his painted feathers, my tips brushing against his scars.

He's very quiet. I suppose I am too.

I don't feel very different. I know I'm supposed to be shocked by the threshold we've just passed, but I don't. The only thing I'm awed by is him.

"Are you all right?" I ask finally.

He smiles against my shoulder. "Just basking in the sheer joy and terror of consummating a decade-long obsession." He looks up at me, and laces his fingers into mine. "I have loved you since before I knew what love was. I have wanted you since before I knew what wanting meant. And I never, ever thought I would have you." He swallows, kissing my fingers. "Was that all __"

I roll him over, lying my bare chest across his, and take his face in my hands. "It was perfect." I say, and it probably isn't a lie. Despite the soreness and the brief spark of pain, despite the things that didn't happen but one day would, it was perfect. "You're perfect," I tell him, and kiss him so he knows.

"You don't have to lie—"

"I'm not," I assure him, uncurling his hand and placing his palm against my chest. "Cross my heart."

He drags his lips down my neck. "I just feel like I got more out of it than you did."

"Well," I say, my voice light, "we'll just have to try again, won't we?"

*

Although Beltane traditionally ends at dusk, with no concept of time and no need to finish, the celebrations continue well into the night. Hades and I sneak food from the banquet and scuttle away to our room.

We have a picnic on the floor.

And then we go back to the bed, and try it again.

And again.

Each time is different and better and wonderful and lovely. We explore and experiment, doing other things, other things that seem to fracture the air, sending the stars swirling from the ceiling, banishing two kinds of darkness. We kiss and hold and touch until it wears to paper thin, until we're too exhausted to think of anything outside.

So this is what it's like to crawl inside a person, I marvel late into the night as he sleeps against my chest.

And he doesn't wake up, not once. His dreams are sweet and untroubled, and neither of us stirs until well into the morning.

I can hardly speak for grinning.

We meet Libby in the kitchen for breakfast. She's incredibly hung over, nursing a large coffee. There's twigs in her hair.

"Good night?" I ask her.

"Totally worth it," she says. She nudges my shoulder. "You?"

I blush furiously.

She raises an eyebrow. "That good, huh?"

My dad drops two bacon sandwiches in front of us. "What are you two girls giggling about?"

"Nothing!" we snap.

"Uh-huh. Sure. Ketchup?"

Libby smothers her sarnie in sauce and moans as she digs into it.

Hades sits down opposite, grinning as he slides his foot up my calf.

"Ah, Hades! Bacon sandwich?" offers my father.

Hades snaps his foot back to the floor. "Yes, please, thank you, sir!" he rushes, as if the speed of his words will help cover up the fact he spent last night having sex with his daughter.

Dad, happily, remains oblivious. Or indifferent. I had precisely one sex talk from him about three years ago where he told me it was frankly none of his business, as long as I was safe about it and we treated each other well. Then he gave me a book about it which I never read partly because the internet is a thing, but also because I was *mortified.*

I shouldn't have been surprised. Dad's solution to everything was to throw a book at it.

He makes Hades up a sandwich. "You can call me Phillip, you know."

"I call him Professor C, if you prefer that," Libby adds.

Hades looks like he'd prefer to never speak to anyone again. Maybe coming out for breakfast was a mistake. I catch his eye and mouth, "are you all right?" but he just shrugs and smiles.

We eat breakfast in relative quiet and slip away before it gets too hectic. I'm not sure anyone notices us leave.

"Shall we go for a fly?" he asks, grinning.

"You're not going to try and have sex with me in the air, are you?"

"What? No. The physics of that would be… difficult. We'd definitely crash into something and die. It might almost be worth it though. Almost."

"All right. Yes to the flying, no to the dangerous sex. Let's go change."

He dresses in his old attire, a black scaled doublet with feathered shoulders, even glamouring on his kohl eyes. He looks every bit the King of Hell, and it's a struggle to stick to the plan and not tear off his clothes again myself.

I wear my bronze fighting leathers, strapping on my rapier. "I wonder if I should give this back to you," I say, gripping the hilt. "You need your own weapon."

He shakes his head, taking a long dagger from the wall. "This will do for now. Keep it. It suits you."

We leave the room hand in hand, although we let go to fling ourselves into the air once we're outside the gates. We're not quite sneaking off—half a dozen people see us leave—but feel a quiet thrill at the thought of being out.

Flying beside him is what I imagined flying would be like when Apollo first taught me; blissful and wonderful, like being cut free of the world. We glide in long, lazy circles, stopping to steal skimmed kisses, and race each other through the wider caverns.

At one point, he laughs, and the sound crackles against my heart like a spark. I had forgotten the sound.

I chase him onto a ledge and kiss him very thoroughly at that, and we sit there for some time, whispering sweet words until our voices turn to honey. Afterwards, we lie against each other above the swirling green waters of the River Styx and pretend we're somewhere else.

"It's not beautiful," he says, eyes cast across the murmuring surface, "but I have missed it."

I ask him to tell me about Emetria's villa, and he babbles away merrily about it, and then stops to stroke a loose curl from my face. "When this is over, we should go there. There's a lot of places I want to show you."

"There's a lot of places I want to go with you."

He smiles and kisses my temple, but a sharp cry cuts through the moment. It's coming from one of the caverns.

I dive into it without thinking, Hades freezing before sliding off after me. A group of goblins—none of ours—are fleeing from a spirit. I've seen hundreds before, a few dozen out of the water, but there is something different about this one. It's longer, distinctly female in shape, and it looks more human even though its arms are monstrously long and its jaw juts out like a snake.

I pause, surveying the scene. Hades arrives at my shoulder.

"Have you ever seen a spirit like that before?" I ask him.

"She's on the brink of changing," he explains. "Becoming a wraith. She's far from the Styx. How did she get here?"

Neither of us has an answer to that, and she plunges her rakish fingers along a goblin's back. The other two flee. I launch forward and finish the downed one with my rapier, holding the blade up to spirit.

Her hands gesture wildly, her mouth flapping. She's trying to talk, and usually, I'm able to listen, but her meaning is wading through sludge.

"Stop, stop, calm down!" I tell her. "It's all right. You're safe. You just need to get back into the river, come with me, you're going to be fine."

I try to reach out to her, but she jerks away, shaking her head. She mumbles more shapeless words, and through it all, I hear only one.

Peony.

My blood runs cold.

"You… you have a message for Peony?"

I glance across at Hades, whose face is drained of colour. He's been down here longer, he can hear more.

"She… she says she *is* Peony," his whispers, his voice cracking.

My veins ice over. "That's not… that's not possible. I saw her yesterday, and you're..."

You're dead. You're on the brink of changing. Even if something had happened to her I didn't know about, you couldn't be almost a wraith by now.

The spirit shakes her head. *Not… me.*

"What do you mean?"

Not me!

Hades eyes go wide, and without another word, he sprints out of the cavern.

"Hades!"

"Get her to the river!" he screams. "I've got to warn them!"

I don't understand what's going on, but it doesn't matter, because he's right. I have to get her into the water. Even though…

Oh God, Peony. She's dead. She's really dead. I try to think of the last time we spoke, what I said to her, but we've uttered precious few words since returning from Tartarus.

Except when she asked me if I ever thought Zera was right. When she asked me what I thought of humanity, as if…

As if she wasn't human.

Not me, not me.

I flashback to finding Peony in the cell, the blood splashed over her tabard, and wonder if that was her, either.

What did we bring back?

"It's all right," I tell her, and wonder as the lie coats my tongue if it's the reason Hades left this task to me. He could not tell her what she needed to hear. "You're all right. Thank you for warning us. But we need to get you in the river, now…"

The spirit thrashes wildly, her noises guttural.

"Peony, I can't understand you! Please, just come with me, we don't have time—" I grab for her wrist, but her fingernails slash my skin. Bright, hot blood springs to the surface. I clutch my arm. "Peony, *please!* You're going to… you're going to die!"

Worse than that. She's going to become a wraith. There's no turning back from that. She'll turn, and I'll have to kill her, and her soul will vanish into nothing.

It's worse than death. It's worse than whatever comes next.

Every outcome is far worse than she deserves.

Dead, dead, dead! her spirit shrieks.

I clutch at her desperately, screaming, trying to pull her back, but she doesn't come. She fights. Against me, against fate, against death itself, I don't know.

"Peony!"

A low, hollow whistle, like the scream of a kettle, and her features twist into something else.

A wraith.

No, no, no…

She lunges at me, a thing where a life was once, her soul corrupted, vanished, gone. I dart out of the way, raising my sword to defend myself, but

without the strength to run her through. I'm still screaming her name, begging her to stop, but she doesn't. She won't. She can't.

Because she's not Peony any more.

When she lunges for me again, I don't hesitate. There's no point. She's gone. It is a shell I face.

It is a shell I destroy, slashing her through with my rapier.

The air stays greenish-blue for a long while afterwards, smeared with her remains. It wafts on the breeze, a human soul… dissipating.

And then it's gone. Forever.

Nothing of her remains.

Except the face someone else is wearing.

*

Some shapeless amount of time later, Hades finds me. He's brought Artemis with him. He must be able to tell from my face, or the fact I'm still where he left me, that I didn't get her to the river.

"Oh, Persephone, I'm so—"

"Don't," I tell him, because I can't have pity, not now. I glance at Artemis. Her steel eyes shine, but her face betrays nothing else.

Peony had been with her for a century. Her hunter. Her *friend.*

"Did you see her today?" I ask.

"This morning, early," she admits.

"Did she seem… different?"

Artemis bows her head. "She hasn't been the same since Tartarus, but I just assumed… I wasn't paying enough attention. I should have noticed, prevented this—"

"We need to find her," I say, although this is probably obvious. "Or whatever is wearing her."

"I have hunters posted at every exit. She won't escape."

"Spread out. Search every cavern, everywhere."

Artemis lets out a low whistle, summoning any of her hunters on patrol nearby. I don't wait to hear how she explains everything to them; I leap into the sky.

Hades follows. "You're bleeding."

"It doesn't matter."

"Persephone—"

"Find her!"

He nods silently, and we split up. This might be a mistake. If something was powerful enough to take over her body, it's probably capable of putting

up quite the fight. But I don't think of that; I can't.

I think about what it wants, what it might know. It was among us for the better part of two weeks. What has it discovered about us, and what will it do?

If it wanted us dead, why not kill us? How easy would it have been to slaughter us while our guard was down, to sneak into our room and...

A shudder passes through me, thinking of how vulnerable we've been, how much we could have lost.

I search cavern after cavern, passageway after passageway, streaming through every tunnel, every rocky hall. I pass hunters and patrols, not stopping to address the bemused looks on their faces as I hurtle past. I don't stop for anything.

Until I spy the Ferryman.

Charon is not made of mortal flesh. He's half forged from the very stone, capable of teleportation. If anyone might have noticed—

"Peony," I rush. "Have you seen anyone that looks like her? She's a mortal human, black hair—"

"I know Peony," he says. "She's nice. Kind."

She was. *She was, she was, she was.*

"Have you seen her?"

"She was heading towards the pool of memories." He pauses. "What do you mean, someone who *looks* like her?"

"Take me to the pool."

"But—"

"Now!"

Charon sighs. He turns to a tunnel and whirls his long, bony fingers. Something dark shimmers in the depths, like an ink-blue sphere of water.

He glides towards the entrance, beckoning me to follow.

I do. It's like passing through a sheet of ice.

Charon can't create portals everywhere. It's more like he can sense folds, places to pass through in this realm of smoke and earth. We emerge elsewhere, closer to our destination. He has to locate another. We hop around in the cold, lingering dark.

Eventually, I see the cavern open ahead, the pristine, still waters.

And a dark-haired figure kneeling beside them.

Peony.

No, not Peony. The thing that killed her.

I draw my rapier, and walk forward tentatively.

The figure looks up, her eyes on me. She must know from my expression, from my drawn weapon, that I know what she isn't.

"You won't stop me," she says, and her voice is still Peony's, even though there's something else, something *other* behind it. "Although for what it's worth," she continues, "I'm sorry about your friend."

She dives into the pool.

A light all at once dark and blinding sears through the air, hot and burning and blistering. Charon covers me in his cloak, shielding me from the blast. Images rip through the air.

A woman bent over an empty cradle, weeping, rage waving off her. Kronos stands over her, his shadow dark and menacing.

"You killed our baby," she seethes.

"I will kill them all," he says. "Every child you ever beget, I shall consume, until the Oracle gives me another prophecy."

She looks up at him. Rhea, black eyes burning. "If it takes me a millenia, I will find a way to punish you for this."

He laughs. "I look forward to watching you try."

I see half a dozen empty cradles, and then another memory; Rhea swapping her newborn for something else, bribing a midwife to take her own child away before he comes.

Zeus.

I watch her watching her son raise an army against his father, watch the expression of pride on her face, of elation when Kronos is brought to his knees.

And the look of betrayal when Zeus banishes her to Tartarus, too.

"But… I helped you," she stammers. "He's a monster."

"I'm sorry, Mother," he says, his voice stone, "but you're all monsters to me."

Tears slide down her cheeks. When she's dragged away, she doesn't struggle. "Take care of my world."

I don't see what he does with it.

What I see is Tartarus. I see the Titans moulding it with their magic until it stiffens and slides into mere slivers of it. I see them building the labyrinth for no reason other than *fun.* They trap monsters, make them fight each other. It's rare indeed that Zeus sends them another creature, and they make sure that every agony is prolonged. If the prisoner can be killed, they take a long time doing it.

Sometimes they have tournaments among themselves, to see who deserves the honour of killing their new toy. Death means nothing to them, torture is a game.

Rhea never takes part. She watches. She feeds the prisoners and soothes their wounds and asks for stories of the outside.

And sometimes, sometimes, she puts them out of their misery.

Sometimes they ask for it. Beg, even.

To begin with, she cries afterwards. After a few centuries, the tears stop.

I see them bringing in Hades.

No, no, don't make me watch this.

But I can't close my eyes, either. Like her, I can't turn away.

They beat him and break him and ply him with drugs. They ask him to open the way. He refuses. He keeps refusing, no matter what they do, no matter what they hurt, or how long they deny him food or water, or how close he's brought to the brink of nothing.

"I won't break," he spits, his eyes bloodied pits. "I won't open the gate for you, not ever. Not while *she's* safe."

I scream his name when he speaks, wishing to rip through time and save him before. To stop him enduring this for me.

Rhea binds his wounds. "Who is she?" she asks. "This girl you'd do anything to protect?"

He tells her everything, and then, only then, this boy who swore he wouldn't break does, and his sobs go on for hours.

The only thing he screams is my name.

Rhea starts to poison his food. I know why she needs to be careful, why she needs to make it slow. If he dies suddenly, they'll blame her. They can't kill her, but they are practised in pain. He needs to die in battle.

But he doesn't. Weak as he is, he keeps fighting.

"I don't understand why you won't just give up," she asks him one night.

He half smiles, his lips torn and ragged. "I'm not sure if she loves me, but I'm fairly sure she'd be very pissed off if I didn't fight back."

I love you, I love you, I love you.

He isn't always strong. One night he lies in Rhea's lap, his wings shredded, and begs for her to end it. Her face contorts, because she's trying to, but she can't just run him through.

"You need to hold on for Persephone," she tells him instead.

“She’s not coming,” he says, and his voice grates against my heart, “she doesn’t want me. There’s no point, there’s no point any more…”

And Rhea, despite knowing he’s going to die, that she’s trying to kill him, says, “there’s always a point, hold on to hope, Little Hades,” and returns to doctoring his wounds.

I see the day we arrived. I see the fight breaking out, Rhea fleeing to the cells, and finding Peony, wounded and bleeding.

That’s the last thing I see.

The world folds back to normal, and Rhea floats out of the pool. Peony’s body has gone. It’s all her, now, pure titan, a queen in white and gold.

“What… what have you done?” I manage.

“I remembered myself,” she says, and her voice is hard and cold and *loud.* It radiates, echoes.

I can see why mortals thought she was a goddess.

“I don’t understand,” I say, because all I just saw showed Rhea as an innocent. A victim of Kronos. A friend to Hades. Why after all that… “You killed Peony.”

Rhea tilts her head. Her hair is wound in golden laurels. Her brown skin glows. “I saved her,” she says, and I understand that while she never revelled in the torture the rest of her family did; death is not quite the same for her as it is for us. Not after all that time. “She was half-dead when I found her in the cell, her fragile life spilling out of her mortal shell. And I realised how easy it would be to slide inside her, to escape that awful place…”

“But why? Hades said you didn’t want anyone to leave. You even poisoned him to—”

“They *deserved* that hell. They deserved everything. The chaos they wrought on the world, on our children… on *my* children. I just wanted to see them again. I wanted to come home. I thought that Peony and I could share this body, that I could experience life again through her eyes. And if I died, so be it. I have lived long enough.”

“What changed? Why did you—”

A muscle inches in her temple. “Peony fought back,” she says. “So I had to remove her.”

“She turned into a wraith.”

Her face freezes. This, at least, means something to her. “She could have gone in the river. She had that choice.”

“She was a fighter. She wanted to warn us.” I swallow. “Why did she fight? What was she trying to warn us about?”

“I helped shape this world, you know. Built it for my children. Zeus may have sent me away, but I had others. Now I come back here and find that all my children are dead, and that their descendants... They rule in shadows, dancing under the whims of mortals, whose destruction of my world is akin to Kronos’. If he was punished, so too must they be. Before there is nothing left.”

“You’re as mad as Zera.”

“No, I am not mad. I am angry. I am a mother, showing her children the way. Letting them learn from their mistakes.”

“They won’t learn if they’re dead! You’re… you’re not teaching your children. You’re killing them and giving their toys to another!”

“The world is not a toy,” she says darkly. “And it is not a thing that can be given. You will learn. You will *see.* I will make you.” Sparks curl along her fingers, terse and gold, flickering like the tail of a cat.

“My Lady—” Charon starts, hand at my elbow.

Rhea raises her fist, but Charon knocks me back, covering me once more with his cloak. He breathes hard and ragged as her magic sails overhead.

“I remember you,” Rhea says. “Charon. You are different than before.”

“I have been both gifted and cursed by mortality.”

“How interesting,” she says coolly. She extends a hand. “Come with me. Get me out of here, and I shall give you any reward you could wish for. Like me, you have been imprisoned far too long.”

“I… I cannot,” he falters. “I am sorry.”

“Hmm. Pity.”

She raises her hands to the ceiling, and the roof comes crumbling down.

A low scream sounds from the mouth of the tunnel.

“Persephone!”

Hades charges forwards, flinging his arms upwards, and the rocks above me still. His knees buckle, and for a moment I wonder if he’s holding up the entirety of the Underworld.

“Run!” he hisses.

“Like Hell!” I snap, and join him underneath the load. The weight is impossible; my wounded arm feels like it’s going to snap.

“We’ll both die,” he says, his eyes tight on mine.

“I don’t care.”

Somehow, he smiles. “Liar.”

“Don’t ask me to leave. Don’t ever ask me to do that.”

Charon scrambles at our feet. He’s trying to pull something out, like a black sheet. It takes me a second to realise what he’s trying to do.

He’s trying to move the portal, to bend one away from its natural space.

He has so little in the way of muscles, but every part of him is straining just as hard as we are, trying to fold the portal towards us.

It snaps around our legs, and we go tumbling into the dark.

Straight into the Styx.

We burst to the surface, coughing and spluttering. I suck in my wings, fingers crawling at my flesh. Hades glances at me to make sure I’m OK, and streams towards the bank.

I can’t see Charon.

“Hades!” I scream.

He’s already at the bank. He looks around, but he doesn’t seem concerned. I am. He saved us. Whatever else he’s done before now, he saved us.

I dive under the surface, blinking through the spirits, through transparent, ephemeral, corpse-like faces. *Don’t look at them. Look for him.*

A dark spot in the distance, sinking to the endless bottom. I crawl through the water, scooping an arm under his and breaking to the top, spitting out water. It tastes of cold and death and nothing.

Hades glides overhead, not touching, as if still debating where or not to help. I’m still not sure he’s helping Charon when he plucks him from the river. I think he’s just helping me.

Charon is not moving when Hades dumps him on the bank, still as stone when I clamber up after him.

“No…” I moan.

Hades hangs his head.

I touch his immobile chest, my hand radiating warmth. Hot light spills from beneath my fingertips.

“Sephy…” Hades says. *Don’t. It’s not worth it.*

It is. It *is.* I refuse to let another person die.

His chest shudders, and he rolls to the side, breathing heavily.

“Why did you do that?”

“If you want to make amends, Charon,” I whisper, “make them. Live. Live and make more.”

He slumps back to the bank. Far off, there is a distant rumbling. Rocks fall from the ceiling. Horns are blaring. I can't move. My arm is past hurting. Every muscle throbs. There's nothing left in me, nothing at all.

Peony.

Hades slides an arm underneath my back and legs, and lifts me against him. He speaks to Charon, but doesn't yet look him in the eye.

"When you've recovered, make your way to the palace," he says. "It is not safe out here."

He swoops into the sky, and I barely have the strength to hold on.

*

I'm not conscious of anything outside the room, or whatever happened between the bank and the door closing. I don't know what Hades said to anyone who asked. Somewhere, dimly, I know that there's a battle raging, but I'm not part of it. I don't have to fight.

There's no fight in me.

In Rhea's memories, Hades fought for weeks, but if I was in that arena now, I'd let the monsters end me. I'm already hollow.

Hades helps me out of my clothes and into the bed. He cleans my arm and bandages it tightly. In a few days, it will be gone. All proof of Peony will have vanished from my skin, but my mind…

I want these scars, is the first thought in my mind. *I deserve them.*

"I'm sorry," Hades says. "Were you close?"

I never told him about her. How is that possible? How had I not mentioned her when I told him about everything that had happened?

Because she wasn't important to you. Because once you got him back, you forgot about everything else.

Foolish. Selfish. Fraud.

"Yes," I told him. "She was a good friend to me. But I wasn't to her, I wasn't—"

He pulls me into his arms as the tears come thick and fast. I choke on my sobs.

"Tell me I'm not awful."

"You're not awful."

"Tell me I'm a good person."

"You are the most excellent person I know."

"Tell me it's not my fault."

"It wasn't."

"And I thought faeries couldn't lie."

There's a knock on the door, and enough of me trickles back to recognise Artemis standing at the threshold. She's disheveled, covered with thin cuts and bruises.

"She's escaped," she reports. "Rhea has escaped."

"Any losses?" Hades asks.

"Some."

That jolts me back. "Is Libby—"

"She's fine."

I should ask about the others, but I don't. I'm not sure I want to know. Not right now.

"How is this even possible?" Artemis asks.

"She took over Peony's body," I whisper, my voice like a stranger's. "She…" Somehow, I choke out the whole, desperate story. Emetria arrives halfway through, no doubt apprised of the rest of the situation. She disappears for a moment and reappears with something hot and bland for me to drink.

"Looks like Zera will finally get what she wanted," Artemis surmises ruefully. "The might of a titan."

You will be betrayed and not betrayed.

These were the consequences the Oracle had warned us about. I hadn't listened. I hadn't *thought.*

I hadn't cared.

The longer this goes on, the less of me there is left. I feel frayed, and I'm snipping off every end, but the ladder runs all the way up the ribbon, to the very core of me.

There'll be so little left, soon.

Is there even anything left worth preserving?

I feel drowsy. Whatever Emetria stirred into the mug is working.

"Come," she says to Artemis, "let's discuss this elsewhere. Hades, watch over her."

"You don't need to ask."

The door closes softly behind them. He crawls into the bed and holds me. He's warm, but I don't quite feel it. I don't quite feel anything.

"I saw you, in Rhea's memories," I tell him.

He stiffens. "And?"

"I don't have anything else to say. I just wanted you to know. I saw you, and I hate them. I think I hate everything. I despise the entire world and everything in it, apart from you."

He doesn’t tell me that’s not true, and I fall asleep before I choke out the words that of everything in every world or realm, I hate myself most of all.

The next morning, a meeting is called. There is a quietness to the corridors I've grown unused to, a graininess to the dark. The number we lost yesterday was minimal, but there's a weight to the absence. Each name, whether I knew it or not, cuts a little part of me away.

"I've been researching," my father announces, "trying to deduce what we can expect from a titan, and Rhea in particular. I must say, your record-keeping is shocking."

"If we ever wrangle the High Court from Zera's grasp, you can have a position as court historian," Emetria says, half-fondly. She looks exhausted.

"I, Em, am going back to the university and never doing anything reckless or dangerous ever again, but I appreciate the offer." He drops a book on the desk, scanning down a collection of highlighted notes.

"The Titans, collectively, have almost unimaginable power. Alone, a little less so. Rhea's powers seem to be largely limited to earth—hence the earthquakes—but there's also mention of fire."

"How powerful are we talking?" Artemis asks.

Dad pales. "A single titan has been known to wipe entire cities from the map."

The room goes quiet.

"But cities back then were much smaller—"

"So big then, basically?"

"Yes," he says slowly. "Big. And bad. Very bad." He readjusts his glasses**.** "Of course, it's unlikely that Rhea is currently operating at full strength. She's been in Tartarus a long while. She shouldn't be able to wipe any cities off the map just yet—"

"But if we don't act soon, she will?"

Everyone looks down.

"We need to take the fight to Olympus," Emetria declares. "With Valerian's forces, we may stand a chance—"

"Against a titan? A *titan?*" hisses Artemis. "I have lost enough of my hunters. I will not risk them again until we have a better plan in place."

My father folds up his book. "I'll get researching."

Emetria nods. “I’ll assist.”

The meeting is adjourned. What more is there to say? We’re stuck, we’re screwed, we don’t know what to do.

What if there’s nothing we *can* do? What if Rhea helps Zera destroy the world, and all we can do is watch?

Or join her.

Or die. We could die.

“’Sephone?” Hades stops at my elbow.

I think I want to crawl under the table or beg someone to finish me off or run.

I just want to run.

I pick that, because it almost feels like doing something, and flee the palace, kicking off into the air.

Rhea’s devastation is rife. Entire bridges have collapsed, being rebuilt by our forces. Tunnels are obliterated. Entire caverns are buried under rubble. I make it to the one filled with statues from a former Hades, and although the chamber is intact, the sculptures have been reduced to dust.

All this, minutes after getting her body back.

I flit and fly until I’m exhausted, weak from hunger and life and everything. I sit down by the bank and listen to the wailing river. Their voices keep me from screaming.

I try not to think about Peony or Rhea and fail at both.

Someone silent slithers behind me and drops down to my level. Her long, scaled tail dips into the water. The tip twirls around the spirits, almost like she’s playing with them. Another day, I could pretend they’re dancing. Not today.

“I don’t know what I’m supposed to do,” I tell Medusa.

“You are not alone in that emotion,” she says.

“And I can’t believe… I can’t believe so much. I can’t believe that Peony’s gone and I didn’t notice, and I hate that I couldn’t save her. And I can’t believe that *Rhea* did all this. She… she helped him. She helped Hades. Whatever she might have had planned for him, she didn’t want him to suffer. She was looking out for this world. A few weeks ago she was a good person.”

“From what I hear, she still believes she’s looking out for the world.”

“But she isn’t. She *isn’t.*” I pause, my breaths hurting. “I’m losing myself, Medusa.”

“You’re worried you’re turning into her?”

“I’m worried that even if we win, there’ll be nothing left of me. Or him. Just scraps of what we were.” *Nothing worth saving. Nothing worth clinging to.*

“You may not know that *until* this is over. But I will say this; just because you are lost, doesn’t mean you can’t be found. I myself have been a villain, have killed, and killed innocents, and not regretted it. I would not do so now. Perhaps I may again. None of us are perfect, but our intentions can be. And yours… yours are.”

“I just… I want to be alive again,” I tell her. “I want to know that if this ends, the world can be good again. If it ever was before.”

“I do not know much about the world outside,” Medusa says. “But when I walked it before, I always found it to be very much what you made it.”

“How did you get so wise?”

“When I petrify my enemies, I steal a chunk of their wisdom.”

My eyes widen. “What, really?”

“No, Little Majesty.”

I snort. “I’m getting used to people not being able to lie.”

“I shall entertain you with my lies till the breath leaves my body,” she announces. “Or yours, whichever is sooner.”

It ought to be a dark thought, and perhaps it is, but I feel something like a smile pull at my lips. It doesn’t have the reach that it used to, but it is there.

We head back together, the long way. I stop to fix one of the bridges, clear one of the tunnels. I spy Charon amongst the helpers.

“You’ve recovered?” I ask him.

He nods. “Thanks to you.” He turns towards Medusa. “Lady Gorgon.”

“Ferryman.” She smiles as he speaks.

I like to imagine he’s smiling, too, so when I walk away, I summon him a new glamour, in time to see his cheeks blush wildly.

Medusa tilts her head. “Your cheeks are red.”

He looks down, realising what I’ve done. “It’s the glamour, I assure you.”

“Oh no,” I say, glancing backwards, “my glamour works *perfectly.*”

I’m about to turn away again when I see his hands reach up towards her veil. She freezes, grabbing his wrist.

“It’s all right,” he assures her. “I still don’t really have eyes. You can’t hurt me.”

Medusa lets go, and he lifts up her veil. He gazes upon her face in that look of worship Hades sometimes bestows upon me. I'm sure he's worn it for her before, but she's never seen it.

"Beautiful," he whispers.

Her snakes hide their faces, rattling pleasantly, and I leave them to clear away the rest of their rubble in peace. I suspect they may be there for some time.

Back at the palace, I head to the kitchens. Apollo's decorating cupcakes again. He hands one to me wordlessly, decorated with a strawberry carved like a rose. It's as good a breakfast as any.

"There's some stew on the stove," he tells me.

"You're as bad as my father."

He grins, ruffling my hair. "I'll take it."

There's a sudden shriek, followed by another. Not a wild, desperate scream, but something panicked. I shoot out into the corridor, Apollo behind me.

"Kill it! Kill it!" My father's voice shouts from the library. "Kill it with fire!"

I rush into the room. Dad is pressed against the bookcases as if he hopes to merge into them, and Hades is dancing out of the way of a huge black spider.

"Who brought this monstrosity into my domain?" he yells, pirouetting out of the way.

I can't help it. I burst out laughing.

"Sephy." He looks up in relief. "Help?"

Usually, I would, but I'm too busy chuckling. Apollo does the honours, scooping up the offending arachnid and taking it outside. I wipe tears of laughter from my face and Hades and Dad compose themselves, straightening out clothes and returning their breathing to normal.

I steady myself against Hades. "Can't you just use a glass, or shoot it with fire?"

"I don't like getting that close to them, or killing them."

My chest warms. "You're so sweet…" I pulled his face to mine and kiss him, staying there a little longer than I mean to.

"Hmmph," Dad pouts. "I don't get called *sweet* when you rescue me from spiders. I just get condescending remarks about, 'who is the parent here?' and once, 'grow a vagina, Dad.'"

I grin. "He's cuter than you are."

“I get that,” he sighs. “I resent it, but I get it.”

I wander across the room, put my arms around his neck, and kiss his cheek. “You’re cute too, Daddy.”

“Aww, it’s been ages since I got a ‘daddy’.”

“Yeah, it’ll be a while before you get another one.”

“As long as I don’t get ‘granddad’ any time soon…”

My cheeks flush. Hades’ do too. He becomes suddenly very interested in the floor. “*Dad*!”

“Look, I’m OK with you two doing whatever it is you want to do, as long as you’re doing it safely—”

I grab Hades by the hand and yank him from the room. “*Bye,* Dad!”

“Safety first, sweetie! Love you!”

“Ugh! You’re the worst!”

“I’m the best, and well you know it!”

Before we cross the threshold, Libby arrives, her arms filled with practise swords. “Ah, good, you’re here. Will you come train with me? I need to work out which of these weapons works best. You know, in case I need to stab a titan, or something.”

“You can’t just stab a titan,” says my dad exasperatedly, rubbing underneath his glasses. “They’re almost invulnerable. *No weapon on earth can kill them.”*

“OK,” says Libby, “but have we *tried* a tank?”

Dad laughs.

“No, no, I’m serious, because we’ve got a *lot* more weapons in our arsenal now… worked on Buffy.”

“I think we should look at a few options other than *tank,”* Dad suggests.

“You’re just jealous because you don’t have one.”

“I could get you a tank,” says Hades. “Just putting it out there.”

“Hmm,” says my dad thoughtfully.

“What’s that?”

“Nothing. Go enjoy your sparring, children. Take care.”

“Umm, I’m actually thirty-two,” says Hades, “just… putting that out there. But that’s still age-appropriate to be dating your daughter. For a faerie. I get that it’s weirder when—”

“Hades?” I start.

“Yes, love?”

“Stop talking.”

“Yes, right. Good idea.” He links his arm into mine, and Libby guides us into the armoury. It’s unusually empty for this time of day, but I guess most people are out fixing the damage, or sleeping off yesterday. This is not a day for training.

But it’s suddenly exactly what I need.

I seize one of the swords and lunge at Libby, making her drop all the others with a clatter. She backflips and grabs one off the floor, parrying my attack.

“Show-off,” I remark.

“You’re just jealous because you have all this power and still can’t back flip.”

I give it a go, but fall flat on my face. Libby laughs, standing over me, and I swipe her feet out from under her. She rolls back into a fighting stance in seconds, lithe as a cat.

We dance across the room, not really attacking. Hades joins in too, and though I suspect the laughter is still a little forced, it is easy, for a moment, to pretend. We’re just kids in the park.

“Just so you’re aware,” says Libby, breathing heavily, “this is the hottest I’ve ever found you.”

“Is she talking to me?” Hades grins.

“I’m talking to both of you.”

She lunges at Hades. He sidesteps her, but I grab his arm and swing him over my shoulder, pinning him to the ground. Libby groans as he smiles wickedly underneath me, and goes to refresh herself.

“I’m a bit of a badass now,” I tell him.

He brushes a loose curl behind my ear. “You’ve always been a bit of a badass.”

“That can’t be true. You’ve known me since I was in pink dungarees.”

“Badassery has many forms, darling.”

Libby declares the sport over, and starts collecting the weapons, dumping several of them in Hades’ arms as I release him. “Don’t forget the narwhal tusk,” she says.

Hades snorts. “Yeah, sure.”

“Why are you laughing?”

He stares at her intently, an eyebrow raised, as if he’s trying to work out if she’s messing with him. “Narwhals don’t exist.”

Libby stares back. “Yeah, they do.”

“Very funny. Don’t try to lie to me. I’m not fooled.”

I blink at him. “You genuinely don’t think narwhals exist?”

“They don’t.” His gaze wanders between the two of us. “Do they?”

We nod in unison.

“But… but… they have ‘nah’ in the name! Like… literal, ‘nah-whale’!”

“Were you dropped on the head as a baby?” Libby quips.

“I was held?”

I let out an awkward gasp and Libby stifles a giggle. “Luliver!”

“What?”

“That’s not funny!”

“Libby’s laughing.”

“This is awkward sympathy laughter,” she explains. “Dude, that’s rough.”

He shrugs, as if it means nothing.

Libby glances at her watch. “Is it late enough to get drunk yet?”

“Libs, we’re not getting drunk and talking about childhood trauma.”

“No,” says Hades, “for I would win that game, and you wouldn’t like it.”

“We’re not getting drunk to talk about childhood trauma,” Libby clarifies.

I breathe a sigh of relief. “Oh good.”

“We’re getting drunk to mask the pain of everything a little bit shit in our pasts and presents.”

“Oh no.”

Hades grins. “I like this girl.”

“Good,” I tell him. “You need more friends. We should invite Apollo.”

“Ugh, no, I hate him.”

“Why?”

“He’s always coming up to me and making silly jokes and—”

“Being friendly?”

“Is he being friendly? I always assumed he was trying to gain information and/or murder me.”

I blink at him incredulously. “We *need* to get you some more friends. Libby, round up Apollo.”

“Shall I bring Artemis, too?”

“Isn’t she a bit old for drinking with the kids?”

“Artemis and Apollo are the same age, actually,” says Hades absently. “Twins. Very rare among our kind.”

I'd always assumed Artemis was older, but they did have the growing-up-together vibe which faeries generally lacked. "Really? But she seems so old and serious!"

"Nah, she's cool," Libby insists.

"You're only saying that because you think she's hot."

"She *is* hot," Libby insists. "And many other things besides."

"Fine," Hades concedes, "but if she says anything mean or snarky—"

"I will punch her in the mouth. Softly. With my mouth. That'll shut her up." Libby grins at the thought, pausing at the door to collect herself. "In a bit!"

I help Hades stack away the remaining weapons, tease him a bit more about not knowing that narwhals were real, and help him summon us some seats. Libby returns with Artemis and Apollo, who looks chuffed at being invited. He ruffles Hades' hair and arranges himself on the loveseat Hades had definitely summoned for the two of us. He glares, but I tug him into a large wingback chair and sit down on his lap. He seems more than satisfied with this.

We drink, and we try to laugh, and not talk of dark things.

For a little while, it works.

*

For two days, we repair, rebuild, and strategise. Hades and Dad create a model of Mount Olympus. Artemis and Emetria crunch numbers. I tend to the wounded and help Irma manage the palace, training with Libby when I'm free. Artemis sends out her spies to try to find out what's happening on Olympus, but no one gets close.

We wait and wait and wait.

"What do you want for your birthday?" Hades asks one evening as we ready ourselves for bed.

I blink at him in sheer disbelief, at first thinking that he's wrong, that it's not my birthday for weeks… only to realise it's three days away.

I'd forgotten.

Then I'm just surprised he remembers.

"Doesn't feel right to celebrate it," I tell him.

"Doesn't feel right not to."

"Hmm, can I ask for peace?"

"High-maintenance."

"How about sex and cake?"

“But those are gifts for me, too…” He pulls at my nightgown, his fingers lingering on the laces. “Seriously. What do you want?”

I kiss his neck. “To crawl away with you to a place no one can touch us...”

He swallows, his throat bulging under my lips. “Once more, I feel that I benefit just as much as you, there… Come on, there must be something that you want. Fancy books? Perfumes from Arabia? A puppy?”

At this threat, Pandora leaps up onto the bed and hisses.

“Not a puppy,” Hades concludes, which is almost a shame because I could really go for some puppy-snuggling.

I settle for snuggling Hades instead, drawing him into my arms and settling down for the night.

*

In the middle of the night, we wake to horns blaring.

Hades bolts upright and into the shadows as I throw open the doors. Hunters and Unseelie pool into the corridors. Emetria emerges from her room, wrapped in a pink nightgown.

Hippolyta, battle weary and eyes wide, stops in front of Artemis.

“London is burning,” she rushes.

Artemis looks too shocked to reply. My voice has run away from me. I might manage a sound, I’m not sure. Libby’s eyes turn into saucers, and I have to bite down the same question that she is; the desperate need to know where Emetria hid our families, if they’re still safe.

“Explain,” Emetria barks at Hippolyta.

“Zera’s forces have attacked the capital,” Hippolyta continues. “Rhea is with them. They have set fire to part of the city. It is burning.”

Emetria is silent for a split second that lasts a short eternity. She turns to Artemis. “Leave minimal forces to guard the Underworld,” she instructs. “Hippolyta, send messengers to every Unseelie haunt you know of. Ask if any will lend aid. Everyone else, suit up, and follow me. We leave immediately.”

I turn back into my room to dress. Hades has prised himself away from the wall.

“I’m coming too,” he declares.

“No, you’re not,” I tell him. “You’ve used up your two days. You *can’t.*”

I burst into the closet, hauling off my nightgown and yanking on my battle gear. Hades helps me strap on my armour, still arguing. He follows me

into the corridor.

Emetria meets us there, casting an eye over his lack of gear. “Not coming, Hades?”

“He’s used up his two days a year,” I explain.

Her face pales. “You can’t come.”

“It wouldn’t kill me,” he says.

“No, but it’ll make you wish it would.”

He mumbles something under his breath, something I’m not listening to. I join the throngs of people lining up beside the boats. Charon captains one. I slide into his vessel, but Hades touches my shoulder.

“I’m coming with you to the portal,” Hades insists. “So I can be as close as possible.”

“You can stick with me, lad,” Dad says, arriving hastily dressed with a large satchel strung over his shoulder. “I’ll be behind the lines with the healers. Safe. And busy.”

He gives me a look; the look of a father who wishes he could argue against this, who wishes I was still young enough to be wrapped in cotton wool, propped on the side of the bath with a scraped knee. The kind of pain that can be dispelled with a plaster and a hug.

“You’re a medic now?” I say, brightly as I can.

He pushes up his glasses. “Theoretically,” he says. “Plus years of experience fixing up you and Libby. Mostly Libby.”

“What can I say?” Libby says, squeezing in bedside me. “I’m a danger magnet.”

We don’t say much else as the boat kicks off, and we fold through the shadowy dark. Artemis barks out instructions and strategies across the boats as we glide along the river. I try to listen, but it’s mostly, ‘we know nothing, stick together, listen to me.’

Hades’ body is tight beside mine, stiff as iron. He stares at the floor of the boat.

“I did it once before, you know,” he says.

“Did what?”

“Went above when I’d used up my days.”

“What? Why would you do that?”

“To see you.” He frowns, as if this is obvious.

“You’re an idiot.”

“I imagine that I probably am, when it comes to you.”

I'm too wound-up to smile, but I still feel my cheeks prickle at that. How much longer will he be able to make me feel this way with the smallest of remarks, or…

Or will we both be dead before this inferno between us cools to embers?

I swallow that thought away. "What was it like?" I ask instead. "Going up there past your days?"

"Unpleasant."

"*Unpleasant?*"

"I got as far as the end of the park when I thought the better of it. It wasn't unbearable, but I was fearful of it getting worse. I turned back before it could."

I wonder once more at the sort of ruler—and the sort of mother—that would invoke such a condition on her subjects, and her son. I hold onto that anger, because it gives me something else to focus on, other than what's waiting for us on the other side.

We run out of river and disembark the boats, hurrying along the dark corridors towards the circle. Healing stations are being set up in the caverns along the side, but most of the hunters are barrelling ahead.

Libby takes my hand as we wait for our turn. "If my family…"

"I'll get you to them," I promise, not caring about Emetria's glamours or the trouble it could evoke. We're past that, now.

Hades pulls me in for a kiss just before we step up, and I keep my eyes on him as we fade into the light.

An eruption of noise is the first thing I notice, of sirens and screaming.

This is wrong, I think. *We've come to the wrong place.*

It's not London. It can't be. We've appeared in some kind of hell dimension. The air is red and angry and thick with smoke. Orange light blazes across the sky, screaming with smog.

But through the flaming, spasming trees, I spot the spires and towers of home.

It's London, and it's on fire.

"We thought this might draw you out," says a voice from the red haze, and Ares emerges, flanked by a dozen heavily armoured faeries. Athena stands beside him.

Emetria steps forward. "Stop this madness, old friend," she asks. "It is not too late."

“It’s been too late for decades, Em. For the good of the world, madness must happen. In a century, you will see it has been worthwhile. You *will* see. It’s too much of a mess to be salvaged, now.”

“But we haven’t tried, ‘Thena. All this power, and what have we been doing with it?”

Athena doesn’t answer. Ares raises his hand, and his forces charge.

Libby shoots off into the dark. I cover her as she vanishes from view, out to look for her family. I grab the arm of the faerie who launches at me and melt the weapon from her hand. Kicking her to the floor, I soar into the sky.

The park is a flaming mess around the circle, most entrances cut off. I hope Artemis has the sense to send some of her forces to other circles, although I don’t know how long they will take to reach us. More of Zera’s forces are flocking towards us. We’ll be outnumbered.

Rising out of the red, writhing smoke, the rest of the city crawls into vision, a screaming, pulsing mess. Sirens shriek in all directions. London Bridge has fallen down, and Westminster Tower is on fire.

Somehow, the bell still screams. The entire city does, wailing like the River Styx.

If there’s a part of me that feels relief at the fact the suburbs are untouched, that Grandma and Aunt Imogen and her family are probably OK, I don’t feel it. Even the darkness of Libby’s street offers me no solace.

The number of dead already…

Hundreds? Thousands?

My fault. All my fault.

I should never have gone into the Pit. Even for him. How could I possibly justify his life against all of these ones?

Lightning cracks in the distance.

No. I didn’t make this happen. Zera did.

The lightning forks above the tallest building in London, a glimmering pyramid of metal and glass,

The Shard.

A thousand fires reflect in its glassy panes, turning flame and light to liquid, doubling the damage, the ruin of my city.

Zera wants us to come to her. She wants us to beg her to stop.

It’s working. I’m this close to offering her everything she wants.

But I won’t. I can’t.

I fly back to the park and dive through the flames, cutting them away like fabric. I drop to the ground and feel it shake beneath me. I think of Hades tugging at the rocky walls of the Underworld, of Emetria's garden.

I am the Queen of Hell and the Daughter of Spring. Rise up, earth, and burn no more.

I have no command over water, but a wave of earth springs up at my command and stretches across the park, extinguishing the flames. I push and pull it with every movement, a tsunami of soil, riding it until only a few spasming trees remain.

Our forces spread out.

A spear rises from the ground and shoots through my wing. I let out a scream as I hurtle towards the ground, but a pair of arms and dark wings rises up to catch me.

Hades.

We land roughly against the scorched grass, my wings dragging behind me. I seethe as Hades reaches over to yank the spear from my feathers, splashing the wound with some tincture of Emetria's.

He falls back, clutching his chest. A moan twists out of him.

"Hades!"

"I'm…" he wheezes. "I can manage. I can."

But for how long?

A shadow cuts across us. "Little brother," Ares drawls. "You don't look so good."

Hades climbs to his feet, whirling around with a borrowed weapon. Ares disarms him in seconds and kicks him to the ground.

"Luliver!" I scream.

I lunge at Ares, but hitting him is like hitting stone. He flips me over his shoulder and I land beside Hades. He glances at me, his eyes blinking back pain, and seizes the golden rapier at my belt.

It transforms into a sword in his grip, and he launches at his brother.

Ares' claymore strikes him in the side, flat to skin. He's not trying to kill him, which is the only reason he's still alive. Hades kneels before him, face contorted.

"You've used your days," he deduces.

"I may have done."

"Why would you even… Never mind. I know." He glances in my direction. "What it must feel like, to be willing to endure so much for one person."

I summon the weapon to my hand, and charge into action. My rapier will be no match for his claymore if it connects, but the whole point of sword fighting, when you're fighting to win, is *not* to connect. Aim for the body, not the blade.

But Ares is old and experienced and no amount of quick jabs can make up for his sheer *power,* and seconds later I'm on the ground again. I summon my weapon, but a steel-capped boot presses against my wrist.

I glance over at Hades, but he's a crumpled mess on the ground. He looks at me, fingers reaching across the grass. The rest of him jerks like a dying spider.

Something glints in one of the trees, and I feel another pair of eyes on us.

Ares towers over me. "I am the God of War, little girl," he smirks, "do you really think you can defeat me?"

"No," I say, as an arrow hits him in the shoulder. "But she can."

Ares stumbles back, roaring. He yanks the arrow from his shoulder, but the shaft snaps in his hand.

Artemis drops from the tree. "Bad idea, old chap. The tip is laced with poison."

"You…" Ares sways, his face contorted. His knees hit the ground with a thud.

"You won't die," Artemis says, "if that's what you're worried about. You may want to."

She kicks his chest, nocking another arrow. She points it at his throat, and keeps it trained there until he stops moving.

I scramble towards Hades. He moans when I touch him.

"Hades!"

His jaw is tight with pain. He can't even speak.

"Take Lord Ares back to the palace," Artemis says to two nearby hunters. "Quickly!" She hovers over my shoulder. "I'll get an envoy to Zera, telling her we have her son. I need to get back out there. Get Hades out."

She races off before I can say another word. I search around for anyone to help me, but everyone is roped in battle. Lifting him alone is almost impossible, let alone being able to defend myself…

"You have to get up!" I scream at him. "*Please.*"

"*Can't.*"

I grab his face, wishing I could push some of my strength into him. I don't think I can do that.

There is nothing I can give you that is not already yours.

"Give me your pain," I tell him. "Let me shoulder some of it."

"No," he says through gritted teeth.

I seize his arm, feeling the mark on my wrist burn, bright and hot. I suck the pain from him like poison from a wound, fighting him as he struggles against me, determined to hold onto it, to spare me. I swallow a scream; I feel like my bones are on fire.

But it's all right. I can handle it. At least for a little while.

"Get up," I hiss.

This time, he complies. I wrap his arm around my shoulder and drag him back through the frayed smoke, cutting down anyone in our path, each step hot, molten agony until we reach the circle, and plunge into the dark.

Dad and a small army of healers surround us as we materialise, but I wave them away, back to the dozens of others in their care lined up in the tunnels around us. The devastation reaches me as though through a fog, my gaze fixed on the shining headlamp of Hades' pain, stark on his face beneath me.

"Hades! *HADES!* Are you all right?"

He moans a little as I slam against his chest, before sliding upright.

He's all right. He's OK.

I leap to my feet. A wave of wounds rises to my vision; bloodied bandages, gushing injuries, the awful smell of burning flesh. Some are still screaming. Some lack the energy. Others are past pain, now.

I want to help, but I don't have the strength, not just to heal them, but to endure. I can't stay here. I can't watch this.

My fault, my fault.

I fly away from them all, from Hades, from everything.

My clothes are stained with soot and sweat and smoke. I cannot outrun those, or the hard iron grip on my chest, a remnant of the pain, a growing wound of fury.

I can't believe what I've just seen, what I've just witnessed. I can't believe he nearly died for me again.

Visions of the park and the city wreathed in fire burn through my brain, and I drop to the floor in a small, empty cavern and scream until I can't scream any more.

When I think I'm done, I hug my knees to my chest and wrap my wings around myself.

I am a baby bird in a nest, high above the rest of the world. Nothing can touch me here, I repeat like a mantra. *Nothing can hurt me if I never go back again.*

Hades swoops in through the entrance, folding his wings away. I don't look at him. I can't.

"You seem angry."

“I *am* angry. I’m furious.”

“With… me?”

“Yes, you.” *With the world too, but I can’t yell at that.* “And I’d like you to take a moment to think about how mad you’d be if the situations were reversed.”

“Point taken.”

“I could have handled it!”

“I know.”

“Then why didn’t you—”

“I couldn’t stay, don’t you understand? It hurt more to wait than to be there—”

“I took a fraction of that pain, and no, it didn’t.”

Hades’ throat wobbles. He shakes his head. “You don’t know how much I love you—”

“Yes I do! Yes I do, don’t you see?” I leap upwards, pounding his chest. “Don’t you see why you can’t do things like that anymore? When you hurt, I feel it. I feel everything. I feel it and I hate it and—”

Suddenly we’re kissing and he’s holding me and I’m splintering everywhere, hating him and loving him more than ever. I want to fight back, to push him away, to scream and yell and hurt him until he knows, until he understands how much he terrified me, how much it hurt.

But I don’t. Of course I don’t.

“What now?” he says, when we finally break apart.

“You go back to the palace,” I tell him. “I’m going to check on the others.”

He doesn’t dare argue. I head back to the circle. Artemis and Emetria are already there, dishevelled but unhurt.

“Zera’s called a ceasefire while we have her son as hostage,” Emetria says. “But the damage to the city…”

“I’ll round up my remaining hunters and see if we can aid any trapped or injured civilians,” Artemis declares.

“Thank you,” I tell her.

She shrugs. “You aren’t the only one who likes humanity, you know. I don’t do everything for you.”

She disappears into the circle.

I think about joining her, but my days are spent. I won’t set foot on earth for another year, unless we defeat Zera.

We *must* defeat Zera. If this was the devastation that Rhea could wring in a day, I don't want to think about what could happen if we give her longer.

When I return to the palace, I discover an extra door in the corridor, tightly guarded.

"We have a dungeon now," says Medusa, smiling a little too much. "And aren't I the perfect guard?"

"Exceptional," I concur. "Is Hades…"

"He's in there," she says. "Lording over his brother in chains. Can't say I blame him."

She pushes open the door. It's a small, dark, cold room, with none of the grandeur of the rest of the palace, aside from the black shimmer of the obsidian walls. Ares is in the far corner, chained to a cot behind bars of iron, still unconscious. There's a toilet and sink and a few other necessities, but it's as blank and uncomfortable as it's possible to be.

Hades, by contrast, is lounging on a chaise, drinking wine although his hands are shaking.

"I am trying not to enjoy this," he says, "but I don't think I'm doing a very good job."

We sit together in silence for a long while, waiting. I drink to hydrate and glamour myself clean. I don't want to risk going just yet, risk leaving Hades alone with his brother, or missing the news when it comes.

Finally, Ares stirs. He groans and he struggles into a sitting position. "My head is pounding," he complains. "Aren't you going to offer me a drink?"

Hades takes a long, steady sip. "No."

"Cruel, little brother," he says. "After everything I've done for you."

Hades snorts.

"I saved your life, you know."

"Yeah, I'm still trying to work out why."

Ares blinks. "You're my brother."

"You literally tortured me when I was a child."

Ares' temple twitches at the word, not liking its sound. I can tell he never thought of it that way. "To make you stronger," he says. "So you could survive."

"Survive what?" he asks. "Life? Mother?"

"Yes," Ares replies, his jaw tight.

"There were other ways, Zeron," Hades says. "*Better* ways. And different kinds of strength."

Ares falls back to the wall. “If I’d known what Mother was doing…” He shakes his head. “No, I probably wouldn’t have stopped her. I would have told myself a lie till I believed it. The only lies we can truly tell.” He smirks. “I suppose you’re right. There are different kinds of strength.”

I lace my fingers into Hades’. “Let’s go outside and see if the others are back.”

“What are you going to do with me?” barks Ares. “I’m a valuable hostage, to be sure, but Mother won’t do *anything* to get me back. She won’t give up her plans to see me safe.”

“I’m sure we can think of some use for you,” I say stonily, and pull Hades from the chaise.

We meet Emetria in the corridor. She’s flecked with blood and soot, but she doesn’t look injured. Her face is white beneath the dirt.

“How’s the hostage?” she asks.

“Talkative.”

“Good.” She gestures to Hippolyta, who dutifully comes forward. “See if you can further loosen his tongue. I want to know everything I can about Olympus and its defenses.”

Hippolyta looks only too pleased to oblige.

“War room,” she says to the two of us. “Quickly.”

*

All the usual suspects are arranged around the table, looking more weary than ever. I spot Libby next to Artemis and run forward to embrace her.

“Your family?” I ask.

“Alive. Safe. Scared, of course. Surprised to see me. I’m…”

“I glamoured them again,” says Artemis, and I’m surprised to learn, in all the chaos, she found time to do such a thing. Surprised, and touched. I bet Libby is too.

“And London?” I ask.

Libby sags. “It’s a mess,” she says. “An utter, bleeding mess. I’m not sure… how is this sort of thing *fixed*?”

I only saw a fraction of the damage from up high. I hate to think of the parts I missed, the bits still smouldering.

I hate to think that if we don’t do something soon, Rhea can do that again, to another city.

I’m painfully aware Zera chose London because of me. That even if she was the one pulling the trigger, it was shot at because she was aiming at me.

And it worked.

"We don't have a lot of time here," Emetria says. "On one hand, we have a valuable hostage, but I doubt Zera's hand will be stayed for long. And Rhea may act separately from her. We do not know the precise nature of their alliance."

"We will not survive attacking Olympus directly," Artemis says. "Our numbers do not match theirs. The only advantage we've had till now are our defences. Subterfuge is the only answer. We need to get inside the palace."

"Zera will never let us in. Even if we offer to exchange Ares, she'll see that as a trick. And it's not like we can lie our way in."

A silence hums in the room, and inside of me, too. An awful, whirring, pulsating silence. We need to act quickly. We don't have time to wait, to think of something smart and clever.

We have precious few advantages, and we need to use them all.

"You can't," I say. "But I can."

All eyes turn to me.

"Zera doesn't know I can lie," I tell them. "I've proven pretty adept at fooling people before. Let me fool her."

Emetria sighs, putting her head in her hands. "I'm really not going to like whatever your plan is, am I?"

"No," I tell her. "And I think we need to summon Valerian. He's going to get his chaos tonight."

*

It takes a few hours to go over the plan, hours of plotting and strategising, of Artemis giving me precise numbers to repeat, exact locations. I have to sound like I know everything, that I cannot lie.

It takes some practise. Somewhere, dawn must crack before we break.

"Explain everything to our forces," Emetria tells Artemis. "Let them have some time. Prepare themselves. Everyone… if there is anything left you wish to do, do it today. We attack tonight."

Spend some time with your loved ones. Say nice things.

I hug Libby very hard. "I've said everything to you," I tell her, "and there is still more to say."

"They'll always *be* more to say," she whispers into my hair. "Kind of the point of friends, isn't it? But we've said the big things."

"Yes." I swallow painfully. "Is there any chance I can convince you to __"

"Not a chance."

“Yeah. Didn’t think so.” I brush a few errant tears. “If something happens to you, I won’t get over it.”

“Good. Wouldn’t want you to.” She pokes my cheek. “I wouldn’t get over it either, if something happened to you. And if I was forced to return to my ordinary mortal life without anyone to talk to, I think I’d go a bit mad. I’d rather die by your side than live a hundred years wondering if I could have made a difference, so… sorry. Only not. Not at all.” She hugs me again. “I’m so glad your dad signed you up for that defence class.”

“Me too.”

We part ways, and I go to find Hades. He isn’t in our room, or in the library. I spend a little time with Dad, and cry a little more. There’s lots of him wishing I didn’t have to do this and saying dumb, sweet stuff, like it’s still all worth it to be my dad.

“After this, I’ll retire and we can move to the country,” I tell him. “But I’m bringing Hades and our dogs.”

“You’re a sweet little liar,” he tells me, “but it’s the London life for me. Also—”

“What?”

“Before, when you were gone, and I didn’t quite know it, I bumped into Alice again.”

I freeze. Alice was my father’s only serious girlfriend after my mother, a relationship I inadvertently broke up seven years ago and hated myself for. “What?”

“You remember Alice, right? Well, she’s still single, and she gave me her number, and I was thinking, maybe, about giving her a ring. You know. If it’s all right with you?”

“Oh, Dad!” I burst into tears.

“What is it? What’s wrong?”

“You *have* to ring her. You *must.* I can’t believe… I’m so, so sorry that you broke up before, it was my fault—”

“Sephy, no—”

“You don’t need to lie. Not anymore. You broke up with her because I asked you to.”

“We broke up because I couldn’t prioritise her.”

“You shouldn’t have had to!” I shake my head. “Don’t try to fob me off with excuses. Just promise me you’ll ring her.”

“OK,” he says. And then, a little more fiercely, “OK!”

He grins, and I kiss him on the cheek, continuing the search once more for Hades.

I find him in the throne room, peering round the dais. There's a room behind it I've never been to; the tomb of the previous Hades. All of them, no matter the length of time they served here, are interred behind the throne.

I wonder if I will be too, when I die, if after we are dead, my bones will sit with Luliver's forever.

"Not measuring yourself for a coffin, I hope?" I pray my voice is breezy.

He shakes his head. "Emetria's in there."

She told us to go and spend time with our loved ones, and she came here. "You should go talk to her," I tell him.

"I'm not sure I want to."

"Maybe go talk to him."

He raises an eyebrow.

"He was your father."

"I'm not sure what I'd say." He sighs. "Will you wait for me?"

"Until the end of time," I reply. "But please don't take that long."

He slips into the crypt, the door still open. For a moment, neither of them says anything. I catch a glimpse of them standing together, side by side. Candles are arranged around the tomb of Hades XII, several worn away to stubs. This is not her first visit.

"It's good that you came here," Emetria says eventually.

"Is it?"

"I think he would have approved. Of you coming, and… and of you. He may not have had much of a right to be proud of you, but he would have been."

Hades says nothing to this, not for a long while. "He was in on your rebellion, wasn't he?"

"We started it together."

"Did you love him?"

"We had been friends for over three hundred and fifty years. I know… I know he wasn't the best of fathers. But he was the greatest friend I ever had, and it killed me letting him go. You don't grieve a friendship of centuries in a few years. I miss him every single day. Having to make that choice… it will stay with me forever. As will he."

Another moment trickles by. "I don't understand. If he was such a great man, what was he doing with *Zera*?"

“She was not an easy person to say no to,” Emetria explains. “And the second time she showed an interest… Angelo thought perhaps… perhaps he could incite her to be better. And when that clearly wasn’t an option, he thought to keep his friends close, and his enemies closer.”

I wonder what it must be like, to have been conceived in such a manner. I know I took solace before in knowing my parents had cared for one another, however briefly.

“I often wondered, if perhaps…” He stops. “Why Zeron?” he asks. “Why did she care for him, and not me?”

“I think Zera only had a limited amount of kindness in her, and it was all spent long before you came into the world. It was never… it was never anything to do with you. You know that, right?”

He hesitates. “Persephone said something similar.”

“She’s wise, for her age. Can’t take much credit there.”

Another long, drawn out pause. “I used to wish you were my mother.” He rushes the words, as if he can dampen the meaning if he says them quickly enough. “I’m… I’m glad you’re not, now, for obvious reasons, but…”

“I know,” she says. “I feel the same.”

When they finally emerge, both of their faces are wet, and I hold both of them for a very long time.

Hades and I slide slowly to our room and close the door. The ceiling brims with stars, and I’m painfully aware of how much I love everything, how much I don’t want to leave it, how bitterly unprepared I am for tomorrow.

Careful fingers slide up my arm. I close my eyes to shut out tears.

“Don’t say anything that sounds like goodbye,” I tell him.

“Sephy—”

“Please,” I beg him. “*Please.*”

When he kisses me, the rest of the world blots out. Darkness folds inward, sweet and soft. I run my fingers through his hair and rake my hands down his back, feeling skin and scars and the press of his soul. I forget to be tired. I forget everything but his lips on mine, feel nothing but the desperate need to consume him, to be consumed.

Yours, yours, yours forever.

“I love you,” he whispers, as minutes spill into hours, darker and more fragile than mayflies.

I love you, I love you, I love you.

I leave him sleeping. If he wakes, he won't want to let me go. If he wakes, he won't sleep again. And he needs to sleep. I need him as whole as he can be for tomorrow or today or whenever it is.

For forever.

Please, please let us have more than now. Let me have time to know every inch of him. Let me have time to learn things I hate about him, if it means I get to be with him a little longer.

I don't want to die, I don't want to die.

I tell myself it's not going to happen, and I wonder if, if I was incapable of lying, I'd be able to speak those words at all.

Only Medusa is guarding Ares' door, as arranged earlier. The rest of the corridor is still and empty. No one can be seen who is incapable of lying. We cannot let Ares have any chance of talking to them, of revealing the plan.

I walk into his cell, and kick him awake. It's a satisfying experience.

"Ow," he hisses. "Be gentle. I was poisoned a few hours ago, you know."

"Can you move?"

"Why?"

"I'm taking you back to Olympus."

He sits up abruptly, wincing, slightly wobbly. "You've arranged an audience with my mother?"

"No. You're going to get me one."

"You're exchanging me just for a chance to talk? That's a poor exchange."

I look down on the floor.

"I have information," I say quietly. "I'm going to give it to Zera and hope she exchanges it for our lives."

He raises an eyebrow incredulously. "Why would you do that?"

"Because I'm not sure we can win," I whisper, as if I'm ashamed. It isn't hard. I'm terrified. Terror and shame wear similar masks. "I think Hades is going to get himself killed. He's not strong enough to fight, and I'm

not strong enough to live without him, so I'll pick any option that ensures his survival. No matter the cost."

Ares surveys me carefully, and I wonder if he's trying to work out if I'm lying, or if there's a trick to my words. I think back to seeing him at the Unseelie Court, desperately trying to remember if I lied to him, or told Valerian I was capable of it. I can't remember.

"You know," he says, "in a hundred and fifty years, I don't think I've ever really been in love."

"I wish I could say I was shocked."

"Is it really all that?"

"Yes," I tell him, "it really is."

"You'd do anything for him?"

"*Almost* anything," I clarify. "I wouldn't exchange Dad or Libby for him, but anything else… yes, anything else, I think I would do."

Ares raises an eyebrow. "What about your dear mama?"

At this, I force myself to look down, because while the truth is I *wouldn't* sacrifice her, I know that I need to pretend like that's a cost I'm willing to pay, because no way will Zera be willing to let her live.

"Interesting," Ares remarked. "And after all she did for you."

"What would *you* know about it?"

"You'd be surprised what I know," Ares says with a smirk, and climbs to his feet. "Well? Shall we?"

I draw my sword and place it to his back. "After you."

Medusa meets us in the corridor and slides after us. "I don't like this," she says for extra measure.

"You don't need to like it. You need to do as you're bid."

"My Queen," she hisses. "Although not for much longer."

Ares smiles at this exchange. He smiles all the way down the corridor, smiles at the guards slumped in their post, a sleeping draught administered earlier in the night. He smiles at Charon in his boat, summoned by Medusa.

He does not know what we're doing, being bound by the same laws as faeries. He cannot lie, either. Medusa will tell him afterwards, but right now all he knows is that he's escorting me and Ares to some sort of exchange. He must know something's up, that there should be more people, that there's a reason it's only me and Medusa, the two liars.

"Cheer up," says Ares, with a smirk I want to rip from him. "You all look like you're going to a funeral."

“Perhaps I’ll smile again one day,” I tell him, shoving him onto the vessel. “But not for a while, I imagine.”

I’m careful with every world I use, even as I slide into a seat, Medusa after us.

“We need to be quick,” I tell Charon.

“Is anyone—”

“Don’t question me.”

He bows his head. Orders are easy. Orders cannot be lies.

We push forward into the gloom, and everything feels darker and heavier than ever.

“So,” says Ares, leaning back, “what precisely do you plan on telling my mother?”

“I am hardly going to tell *you.*”

“What’s to stop her just killing you the moment you materialise?”

“My blade pointed at your throat, hopefully. And your words of encouragement.”

“What if I don’t give them?”

“I’m banking on you and your mother caring more about your life than I care about mine.”

He frowns. “You don’t care about your own life?”

“I care,” I tell him. “I just care about others’ far more.”

At this, he goes quiet.

“What?”

“I’m just trying to work out if I care about anyone that much, and if I’m actually jealous of my brother. Interesting.”

I might dislike him, but for a moment, I wonder what it must be like to grow up like he did, with a mother who he didn’t believe would ever put him first, who warped him in such a way that he thought he had to abuse his brother to toughen him up.

I don’t hate him any less, but I might pity him more.

I’m too weak and fragile for this world. Even if it doesn’t kill me, I couldn’t survive in it long term. I’m too painfully mortal.

And I think I still want to be. I don’t want to die—I want more time with Hades—but I don’t want to be cruel. I think I’d feel the pain of it all just to feel something.

The boat bumps against the bank. Medusa exits first, hauling Ares up and dragging him down the long passageway towards the circle. She waits until I step inside before thrusting him into my arms.

“Remember,” I tell her, “Not a word to—”

“You have my oath,” she says, “though I gave it unwillingly.”

I bump Ares with my blade. “Well,” I tell him. “You know the way.”

*

A part of me is surprised not to find myself instantly smited the second we materialise on the other side, but perhaps Zera has been keeping this way open just for something like this. No one would launch an attack on Mount Olympus using the front entrance; it would be like tapping on the gates of a castle with a hammer.

We reappear on a platform above the clouds, a round, circular disc before a great, golden gate. The gates of Mount Olympus. Beneath the light of the silvery moon and glittering sconces, an endless quilt of cloud stretches.

“Halt!” cries a guard, shoving a spear towards us. In seconds, a dozen more are pointed in my direction.

I keep my grip tight on Ares, praying in the longevity of Artemis’ poison and the stiff iron of his restraints, and that they won’t knock us both off the platform and send a flyer down for him.

“I come to speak to the Queen,” I tell them. “I bring her son with me. A gift. All I require is an audience. If you cannot guarantee that, we will vanish.”

A few of the guards converse, and one walks to another figure standing by the side of the platform. Lord Hermes, I realise, blue hair shining in the faint light. Although he declared neutrality, he carries messages for all, and I wonder if his neutrality just means he refuses to fight, if he still resides in the palace.

He flips open his wings, and whizzes off into the night. I lock myself into position, my heart hammering. Long minutes tick by. No one moves.

Eventually, Hermes returns. “The Queen will see you,” he declares. “And no harm will come to you while you parley.”

A careful choice of words. At any time, she could declare the parley over and be free to attack me. But I accept the offer. I have no choice.

“Very well.”

I sheath my sword and push Ares ahead of me. Hermes whips out his celestial dagger and cuts through the restraints. They clatter to the floor. Half the guards follow us through the gates.

The palace of Olympus is beautiful, all white marble and glimmering decor. Everything is smooth and intricate, and ceilings have been cut away

entirely, exposing the rooms to the starlit skies above. It is mesmerising at night. It must be something else entirely at dawn.

I wonder if I'll live to see it.

Hermes and the guards march us into the throne room. It's fashioned almost exactly like the Underworld's, but inverted, light where it is dark. Zera sits on a golden throne in a floating tulle gown adorned with white feathers. By her right stands Athena, tall and proud, in a dress that shines like armour.

At her left is Rhea, wearing bronze and brown, a circlet woven into her hair. She looks every bit as terrifying as Zera.

I take a look around the room and assess the exits and entrances, the stumbling blocks, my potential opponents. Dione is not far from the throne, although Hephaestus is nowhere to be found. The guards are numerous, and none look like easy targets.

Zera rises from her seat, and glides forward to embrace Ares. Her arms are stiff, as if she's unused to such an action. "My son," she says, somehow sucking all warmth from the words, "you are unhurt?"

"A little unsteady," he says. "Still recovering from the effects of a poisoned arrow."

Zera clicks her fingers, and a small, winged pixie appears with a goblet of wine. She could easily summon it herself, but for some reason, she still wants someone else to do it. She guides him back to the dais and sits him beside her on the steps before retaking her own seat. She glares down at me like I'm an insect in her house.

"I must say, I'm surprised to see *you* here," she says. "And alone. A rather foolish move, but I agreed to hear you. State your piece."

"I want to bargain with you."

A quiet laugh sweeps through the courtiers. They're all dressed to match her, in shades of blush and white, lace and feathers. They twitter like birds around the sides of the room.

"You have nothing to bargain with," Zera sneers.

"I have information," I tell her. "Information which will aid you in wiping out Emetria's forces. In putting an end to this unnecessary slaughter of our people."

"*Our* people?" Zera sneers. "You are hardly one of us. Why should I believe you anyway? You're a lying mortal."

"I can't lie," I tell her.

She raises an eyebrow.

“I could lie before, but after I transformed, and my ears changed… I lost the ability. I can’t do it anymore.”

Zera looks to Zeron, and to Rhea. I thank my stars we barely had a chance to speak before. “Is this true?” she asks them.

“I’m not sure,” says Zeron, looking at me skeptically, as if trying to unravel every word that’s passed between us.

“I cannot confirm or deny,” adds Rhea. “Nothing of it was mentioned to me.”

“Curious,” Zera continues. “Let’s say I believe that. What else can you offer me? And what do you want in return, other than to leave this place alive?

I look down. “I can open the gate to Tartarus for you, and free more of the titans.” I glance at Rhea. “And I can help you destroy the ones who deserve it.”

Rhea tilts her head. “No weapon on earth can kill us,” she says, but she pauses, perhaps remembering the empty threats I made to Kronos, the ones I never disproved.

“My father thinks he’s found a way. You can ask him about it, glamour him to tell you the truth, but you can’t hurt him. I want your word. My father goes free. And Hades. I don’t want any harm to come to him.”

“And your mother?”

“You can have her,” I say, but I make the words look pained. It isn’t hard. “She was never much of a mother to me. I’ll even convince Hades to give up his seat. I just want somewhere where the two of us can go and leave in peace. That’s all I want.”

This lie is easy, because that really is all I want. I just want the rest of the world to have that option too.

“You can truly give me Kronos’ head?” asks Rhea.

“I think so.”

Rhea looks at me as if she’s half-debating abandoning Zera and siding with me just to have her revenge.

I’m half-tempted to kill Kronos myself, if I can.

Zera surveys me carefully for a long, painful time. “All right,” she says. “If your information is what you say it is, and you agree to uphold your end of the bargain, I agree to your terms. You and Hades—and all your family save your mother—are free and pardoned of your crimes against the crown.”

The smallest gnat of relief slides from me. Phase one completed.

“Emetria is planning an attack at dawn,” I tell her. “Her armies are camped on the western side of the mountain.”

Zera frowns. “Why tell me this?” she asks. “Why tell me of a planned attack? Why not wait to see if it fails first?”

I glance downwards. “Because despite our numbers, I’m not sure we can win. I won’t stake Hades’ life on a perhaps.”

This answer seems to satisfy her, although her sneer doesn’t abate. She snaps a guard. “Go check the intel.”

He soars but into the sky, and we wait. It doesn’t take him long to report.

“There *is* an encampment,” he says. “Sizeable.”

And largely empty.

Although not entirely, and I try not to think about that.

Zera’s eyes flame. “How was this missed—”

“Must have been glamoured, Your Majesty, and glamoured well—”

“Round up our soldiers,” she says. “Immediately.”

Athena barks more specific instructions on the number of forces, but almost all the guards depart. My heart thumps in my chest, waiting for everything to go wrong.

“Well, so far, so good,” Zera hisses. “You look pale, love, would you care for some refreshment?”

I hope my nerves look more like guilt, and I grudgingly accept a goblet. My fingers tremble as Zera lifts hers, as if to toast.

“You know,” she says, “Long ago, I spoke to an oracle who told me that if the child of Emetria was ever presented as a sacrifice of Samhain, that it would herald the destruction of the courts and the dawning of a new age.” She pauses. “I did not imagine this.”

My insides freeze. “What?”

“Yes,” Zera continues, as if the words she’s just uttered haven’t blown apart my world, “I kept a *very* close eye on her after that, you know. I was surprised to learn when she was finally with child. She kept awfully quiet about it, you see. Most faerie women flaunt it. Not her. Then the child was born, and seemed mortal, and I understood what was meant to happen. See, I couldn’t present a faerie child as sacrifice. It was against the agreement. But a *mortal* one, well… that was another matter. I’d suspected Emetria was not as loyal to me as others in my court. I thought presenting her child as a sacrifice might force her to reveal her true colours, make a move, promise

me beautiful, impossible things… I never dreamed it was my own son who would break apart the world for you… or you, for him."

"But that's… that's…" I stumble on the words, which is just as well, as I want to say it's impossible but clearly, clearly it's not. "How?" I ask instead.

"I told the Oracle to tell Emetria that the child was fully mortal and would always be so. I knew she'd hide her away with the father, and that one day I could present her at Samhain."

"But how did you…"

"It took me a while to track you down, and even longer to lure you out of your house. Didn't want to cause a ruckus, you see. If I snatched you prematurely and she caught wind of it, she might rescue you beforehand, and you'd never get to Samhain. So I had to do it carefully. Slowly. There was an attempt the year before last that didn't work out."

I remember thinking I was being followed, hearing something behind me. Dad freaking out when I got home.

His sensor must have gone off.

"But I wandered in of my own accord!"

Zera laughs. "Did you? Because I had one of my underlings glamour your friend to convince you to come out, to offer you an invitation you couldn't resist."

I remember the glazed expression in Libby's eyes, the feeling of eyes on me, the goblin with his magic invitation, the impossible *pull* of that night. A trick? All of it, a trick?

"And then you killed the Oracle," I say with finality.

"Don't look so surprised, my dear, I've done a great deal worse."

Somewhere, in the distance, there's the sound of an explosion. Zera stiffens in her chair. A short while later, a pixie drops into the throne room.

"Report," Zera barks.

"Emetria's forces… they have weapons like we've never seen before," she rushes. "Metal creatures, canons filled with fire…"

All taken from a plethora of military bases with no intention of being returned; part of the chaos we promised Valerian. Long into the night, Hades and I summoned weapons from country after country, weapons that should never have been used by humans, that should maybe never have existed.

Valerian was all too happy to take them off our hands.

A second, much closer explosion goes off, a deep rumble within the walls of the palace. Zera leaps to her feet, charging towards me.

“You lied!” she hisses, her eyes blazing.

“Yes, I’m getting pretty good at that.”

She raises her hand—the one tipped with the gauntlet of celestial steel, the one she used to use on Hades back—and swings it towards me. A dark shape cuts between us, seizing her wrist and kicking her to the floor.

“Do not touch her,” says Hades, and his gold eyes turn red and wild. He explodes into a black felt creature of claw and fang, coated in feathers. His entire body vibrates with fury.

The whole room erupts into chaos as hunters and Unseelie flock the space, but I am conscious of nothing but the two of them, as if the whole world has narrowed to this point.

Zera stares at him. “I should have killed you as a child.”

“Some of the time, I wish you had.”

I press my weapon into his hand, and he raises it towards her.

“But not today.”

Lightning erupts from the end of her fingers, but he catches it with his blade and spits it onto the ground. I look around for another weapon, but the ground cracks beneath my feet. Rhea is tearing through the marble, although there is little earth for her to shake in the palace of clouds. I spring into the air, searching.

“Persephone!” Rhea screams.

I wrench a spear away from a passing pixie and hover in the air above her. Rhea launches a couple of fireballs, sending me reeling for cover. Hades is still fighting Zera, and I’m too far away from them. I spy Artemis and Libby in the background, trying to fight their way to the exit, to clear a path for the rest of our forces. I can’t see Emetria yet, or Apollo. I can’t take on Rhea without the weapon they’re bringing.

Something fastens around my ankle and yanks me to the trembling ground. Dione, leering over me with one of her daggers, a whip clenched in her other first. She takes a lunge and misses, striking the marble floor as it shudders. I kick myself free of her whip and right myself, swirling out of the way of a second attack.

I remember my promise to Aphron not to harm her. I hope she gives me that choice.

“You ruined everything!” she screeches.

I’ve felt like I was ruining everything for a while, now. This is the first time I’ve been proud of it.

“I’m good at that.”

“Hades never looked at me after you came along.”

“If he looked at you before, it was with revulsion.”

“Liar!” She stabs at me again, wild and angry.

“He lied every time he looked at you with anything other than hate. You *know* he’s actually a decent person, right? He could never have loved anyone like you. Never have even *liked* them.”

Her attacks get clumsier, more frantic. I jab her in the ribs with my fist, sending her reeling. “I hate you,” she hisses at the floor. “You stole Hades. You took Aphron. You made me look like *this.*” She gestures to her scar.

I freeze. “I’m sorry for that, but nothing else,” I tell her.

“Why should I believe you?”

She charges again, but someone grabs her from behind, knocking her against a pillar and twisting the blade from her hand. “Shockingly, she’s more trustworthy than most of us,” says Aphron. “Hello, Dione.”

“Aphron!” Her eyes soften. “What are you doing here?”

“Saving you,” they explain. “I joined them to protect you, to spare you.”

“For… for me?”

“Always you, you silly fool. Now come with me if you want to live.” Aphron glances behind them as they drag Dione away. “I always wanted to say that line…”

The ground cracks again, and a pillar collapses. Medusa knocks me out of the way, shielding me as fireballs blast in our direction. Her snakes hiss as one sears against her shoulder.

“Medusa!”

“Flesh wound,” she says through gritted teeth, as another hurtles towards us. A thin, skeletal figure cuts through it with an oar.

“Move,” Charon insists, and then turns to Rhea, hovering in the skies above, suspended by a column of fire. “For I shall not.”

I leap in front of Rhea’s next attack, cutting through it with my spear, shielding them both. The heat of her fire ripples down my weapon, and I drop it to the floor with a clatter, hands burning.

“You lied!” Rhea hisses. “You told me you could kill Kronos!”

I dodge another attack, Medusa and Charon splintering. “I didn’t lie about that.”

For a moment, she pauses. “You know a way to destroy us.”

“I think so.”

Her eyes dart round the chaos. “I see,” she says. “You would never have orchestrated this if you didn’t have a way to take me down, would you?”

“It would have been a foolish move.”

“Desperation makes fools of us all. Desperation,” she hesitates, “and love.”

Her gaze falls to Hades, and a blast goes shooting towards him. I catapult in front, wrapping my wings like a shield and taking the full force of it. I scream as the flames sear against my feathers, and the ground ripples underneath me. I topple into the chasm, drawing my wings out at the last moment. My wings are searing, but I can still fly.

Rhea races after me, ledges sliding out of the marble, but before long I’m treading cloud. She can’t catch me. Her fire needs to connect to something.

“You don’t need to do this,” I tell her. “There are other ways to bring about a better world.”

“*Slow* ones,” she hisses.

“Less murdery ones!” I return, just as venomously. “You side with Zera, you’re as bad as Kronos. As bad as Zeus.”

A fireball narrowly misses my shoulder. “I am *nothing* like them! I care about my people, my world.”

“So do I!”

For a moment, Rhea pauses in her assault, her eyes widening, just a fraction, at the steadfastness of my resolve, my belief. Her head tilts slightly to the side.

“You put everything in jeopardy to save your love,” she argues. “Do you regret it?”

“No,” I tell her honestly. “Because we haven’t lost yet.”

“People have died for the two of you.”

“*That* I regret. That I wish I could take back.”

“Was it worth it?”

“I’ll *make* it worth it,” I swear. “If I live past tonight.”

I swoop over her head and back into the ballroom. King Valerian is stomping through the madness, cutting down Zera’s forces with a double-bladed axe. His hoofed feet send enemies flying, his weapon a scythe in a field of wheat. He’s streaked with blood, a mad, demented creature, and a faint, trembling part of me worries at what we’ve unleashed.

But there’s no time to fixate.

Poseidon's court has joined the fray. A fountain has been split apart. Mermaids ride waves across the space, selkies plunge their savage teeth into the arms of hunters. Poseidon himself is battling Emetria, Athena at his side. Artemis is firing arrows, but nothing hits; they're too well-armoured.

I lunge towards them before Rhea can catch me, knocking Athena to the floor. Before I can scramble upright, she's pinned me under her shield. It was foolish to take her on, the lady of wisdom and strategy, yet she does not take the killing plunge.

"No!" Emetria shrieks. "'Thena, no, I beg you, not my child."

Artemis covers for her, keeping Poseidon distracted. Athena's eyes glance towards her oldest friend. "What would you give me, to spare her?"

"Anything you asked for," Emetria says, without a murmur of hesitation. "I would lay down my life for her, if that was your price. Betray anyone. Commit any evil. But I beg you not to ask. I beg you to let her go. I beg you not to fight."

"I do not wish to fight."

"Then don't. Just don't."

"If only it were that simple." She eases her grip on me, and I scramble free. "I will not kill your child," she says, "but I will not stop."

Emetria trembles, her eyes lined with silver. "I won't hold back."

"Neither will I."

They race at each other in a whirl of blades, bursting with power, glowing with silver and gold. I watch helplessly, not sure of what to do, where to go, where to look. But I can't stop. I can't move.

They slam against each other, there's a sharp, painful gasp, and my mother lets out a strangled cry as she draws back her dagger, wet with crimson blood.

Athena slumps to the ground.

There's no time to mourn her. Poseidon untangles himself from Artemis and takes advantage of her grief, lunging for her, but Emetria summons her spear and readies herself.

"Mum!"

"I'm fine!" she yells. "Get to—"

Apollo drops down in front of me and yanks me away. Behind the dais, a small group of nymphs guards a large metal crate. My heart thumps. I was talked through it last night, of course, but seeing it here right now, knowing what I have to do...

I'm not prepared.

“Will it work?” I ask.

“We tipped the projectile with celestial steel, just to be sure. The rest is up to the Gods.”

“Great, no pressure.”

He puts his hand over mine. “It doesn’t have to be you.”

“Yes,” I say, “it does.”

I glance back at the chaos. I still can’t see Hades or Zera, or Ares. That’s probably for the best. I don’t need the distraction. I just need to focus.

Stop Rhea. One thing at a time.

“Ready the weapon,” I tell him. “I’ll draw her into the open.”

I summon fire of my own, weak and flimsy by comparison, but enough to get her attention. She drops to the floor ahead of me, and people clear the space around us, awed by her power. It radiates from her body.

I feel like a pawn facing a queen.

“It’s not too late,” I tell her. “You can still back down.”

“I spent a millenia or two inside that pit, backing down every single day,” she says. “I am not ready to back down again.”

“One of us must.”

She shakes her head. “You saw my memories, didn’t you, that day by the pool?”

I nod.

“Do you think Zeus was right? Do you think we’re all monsters?”

“I think anyone can become a monster, if they live long enough,” I tell her. “But no one is born that way.”

“But I was never born. And I have lived far, far too long… Do you know, I used to be jealous of our captives? I used to be jealous because they could die. There was an end to all they had suffered. A rest. Do you truly believe you can fix this world?”

“I know I’ll try.”

“I don’t want to fight anymore.”

“Then don’t fight.” I think of Athena’s words, of the weariness of the old, of the desperate clinging to old ways and ideas, despite the exhaustion. Despite other paths.

“If only it were that simple. But when you live forever… nothing except you is.”

Something fells another pillar. Libby and Artemis, rising out of the writhing dark. Rhea glances over, just for a second, but that’s long enough for Apollo to race forward and fling the loaded rocket-launcher into my grip.

Rhea turns back, and frowns.

It's the last thing she does.

I fire, and all of our allies hit the floor. I fire, and her body breaks.

Because two thousand years ago, weapons were steel and iron. Nothing made *then* could rip apart a titan.

But that was a long, long time ago.

Blood and flesh are everywhere, bits of bone. Hair. Her head is mostly intact, but thankfully still. Her eyes are glossed over.

According to my father's research, the bits will want to reassemble. We're not giving them the chance. Fighting the urge to throw up, I grab Rhea's head, and dump it in a nearby pot.

"I'm sorry," I whisper to her sightless eyes. "And one day, I'll try to make Kronos pay for what he did. But you made choices too."

I hand the pot to Apollo. "Find the other parts," I tell him, just in case he's forgotten. "And keep them as far away as possible."

I leave the rest of them still fighting, and hurtle from the space.

It's not over yet, because even though Zera can't win without Rhea, she doesn't know that. She's not here.

And neither is Hades.

I tremble through the rooms, searching, trying to feel that tug I felt before. I spot them by the staircase, Zera lunging towards him. He's still armed, but he's tired, exhausted, leaning against the railing. His darkness is falling away, like he can't hold onto that form anymore. He fumbles an attack, and she wrenches the weapon free. I spring it into my grasp, knowing he hasn't the energy to summon, but I'm too far away, and she's seconds from running that gauntlet under his ribs.

"Stop!" says a voice that isn't mine, and Ares skids towards them, not coming between them, not quite, as if he doubts his presence would stay Zera's hand.

Her eyes go wild, more livid than I have ever seen them. "You… *you* would stop me?"

"He's my brother," he says. "He's your *son.*"

"Why should that matter?" she asks.

Ares shakes his head. "I don't understand. Many parts of you I understand, but not that. Why me? Why not him?"

"Because he was never anything like me," she says. "And you were."

Ares buckles, as if truly, fully understanding the weight of his mother's affections for him. She loves him because she sees herself.

She launches another attack, but I speed across the room and cut her arm so deeply I almost sever it at the elbow. She howls, dropping away, lightning still spitting out of her as her blood pools it to the floor. She stumbles backwards, and Ares moves towards her, as if he thinks to help her, only he stops short, bowing his head.

He could have helped her before, too. There's no way Hades could have held so long against the two of them, even if Ares was still weakened by the poison. He deliberately chose not to fight, to do nothing until death was imminent.

Every attack of hers is met by my blade or my fire, and she keeps stumbling, losing ground.

"You're nothing," she hisses, "nothing at all. I'm a *queen.* The true queen!"

"And yet," I tell her, "no one is running to help you."

For a second, she blanches, but then her eyes dart behind me, to Hades, and she flings out another blast. I tear it to shreds, not caring as it crawls into my bones. I keep moving towards her, keep cutting and slashing, her blood arching like ribbons in the air.

"Don't you touch him!" I scream. "You don't ever get to touch him again! Him, or anyone!"

I raise my weapon above her gauntlet, and I think about taking off her hands. I think about mutilating her and letting her live, because she'd hate that more, because for her, it would be worse than death.

But I catch a glimpse of my reflection in the polished floor, my face streaming with blood, and for a second, I don't recognise myself.

I cannot be that person. I don't want to sacrifice that part of me. Not for her, not for anyone.

"Sephy," says a voice beside me, soft and clear. A warm hand grazes my arm, and slides down to tug my weapon free. "You don't need to do this. Let me."

I surrender my rapier to my mother, and slump to the floor. Hades crawls beside me, whispering my name. I slam into his arms, his fingers digging into my back, and we embrace in the ruin. I'm soaked in his mother's blood.

"Zera, High Queen of the Seelie Court," says Emetria, placing the tip of my weapon under her chin, "do you surrender?"

"Never," she says, her teeth gritted and stained with blood.

"Then have you anything left to say?"

“I—” Zera opens her mouth, and it hangs there, open. Her court lies in ruins, her plans in shambles. Her sons have deserted her, and if any of her subjects can see her struggle, they do not come to the aid.

She has no one.

No last words. No one to implore to, to impart to.

“I—” she continues.

She’s still floundering when Emetria skewers her, and then all of her shudders to a stop.

Light rips out of Zera's body and blasts into Emetria's. The mark on her arm—the circle of wheat interlaced with a needle shaped like a spear—burns away, replaced by a crown of feathers and roses. It's not quite Zera's brand. It's something else, something new.

The light pours out of her and charges into the skies, flushing away the remnants of night. The stars shudder, and a warm wave of sunlight rays outwards. We're all bathed in it, wounds and exhaustion sizzling away, replaced by a wild, trembling energy.

I remember the chaos of becoming Hades, the wild darkness, the crackling of power. This is something else, raw and terrifying and magnificent.

When the light subsides, I feel like I've been peeled out of my skin and crushed back into it. I'm still clinging onto Hades, and him to me, both too numb to unstick.

Emetria rises, seeming taller than before, her skin darker, more golden. She looks beautiful and fearful and utterly mesmerising. No one can speak as she walks, the palace slowly sliding back together as she passes, pillars reforming, tears in the stone mending.

The great chasm in the floor begins to close, but it doesn't fully disappear. A golden line winds through the marble, a beautiful scar. A reminder.

Vines wind up the reformed pillars and arches, blooming with flowers, and a great dawn breaks above us, the clouds swirling with bronze and blush.

Everyone bows, even King Valerian. No one moves an inch as she takes to the throne.

"Arise, King Valerian," she says, and her voice booms. "For we are equals now, you and I. No longer is the Unseelie subject to Seelie law, not unless you wish it."

"It seems we have much to discuss, Queen, er—"

He falters, for traditionally the Seelie Queen has always adopted the title of Zera, a name that seems less than fitting.

"Call me Emetria still," she says, "for there are many traditions that we shall break today. The first being this. Queen I am and queen I shall be, but only for a hundred years and a day."

There is a murmur among the gathering. Never has such a proclamation been issued, and, as faerie, she is bound to her oath.

"From this day forward, let no monarch reign for longer than that term, lest they fall prey to the corruption of years. At the end of my reign, I shall appoint a successor, but they must be approved unanimously by the rest of the High Court."

As first proclamations go, I'm rather on board with this one.

"Lord Poseidon, are you yet living?"

Poseidon, bruised and battered, is brought forth in chains by Hippolyta. "I am, Your Majesty."

"I understand why you sided with Zera, but I cannot allow such a person to remain in my court. You are hereby stripped of the role of Poseidon and shall spend the rest of your days far from my court, never to rise against any crown, do you accept these terms?"

"I do," he says grudgingly, having little choice.

"Good," says Emetria neatly. "The same applies to Lady Dione, wherever she is, and Hephaestus, when we can pry him from his forge." She takes a steady breath. "Lord Ares, come forward."

Ares moves from beside the corpse of his mother, his eyes looking nowhere. He bows before her.

"Our court is somewhat fractured," she tells him. "I am loath to remove another, when, I believe, you came through in the end. If you swear yourself to the new crown, I will not remove you from court. Do you agree?"

He blinks, as though certain he's misheard. "Are you… are you sure?"

"Too many have been lost today, but they were all offered a chance to do the right thing. This is your chance. Do you agree?"

"I… yes, Your Majesty."

"I am glad to hear it." She waves him away, the action of a queen. "Where is Medusa?"

"Here, Your Majesty." She slithers forward, Charon not far from her.

"It is several centuries too late, but the Crown officially pardons you for any perceived crimes of your past."

"Thank you, Your Majesty."

“Additionally, we have several vacant seats on the High Court to fill. I wondered if you might like to be Lady of Agriculture?”

“Me?”

“You could be Lady of the Sea or of the Forge if you prefer? Lady of Revels if you truly desire it—”

“I… I’m honoured, but… I am no faerie.”

“I did say several traditions were to be broken. Do you accept?”

“I… I do.”

“Then it is yours.” She waves her hand, and the woven band of wheat appears on Medusa’s arm. “This seat shall grant you many powers, which I hope you will use wisely, among which is the power of glamour… so that you may look upon others with your own eyes, in whatever form you choose.”

Medusa bows, and removes her veil. A few people shrink away when she rises, but no one turns to stone. Her eyes meet Charon’s, and she smiles.

“Charon.” Emetria beckons him forward. “I cannot make you human, but you have proven yourself a valuable ally. I offer to return your gift of glamour, to do with as you wish.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty.”

“You are also free of your obligations to the Underworld. Go where you will, with *who* you will.”

His papery mouth smiles. “I intend to, Your Majesty.”

He glides back to Medusa’s side, and the two of them hold hands.

One by one, my mother calls others before her, granting them boons or gifts. I wonder if she’s making this up as she goes along, or if she somehow had time to think of it all last night.

I’m suddenly really glad she’s pledged to step down after a century, because I’m worried about what that mind would do with an eternity of power.

Finally, she calls for me and Hades. Together.

“Well, daughter,” she says. “What would you ask for? Other than breaking your restricted visits to the mortal realm. That is already done. Wander freely and frequently, with my blessing.”

I stare at her, completely flummoxed, because now that Zera is gone, and Hades is beside me, I can’t think about anything else. “Rather putting me on the spot here, Mother.”

A light, much needed laughter spreads through the crowd.

“Take a promise then, a favour for the future,” she says. “Lord Hades?”

“I’m fine,” he tells her. And then, as if his own words have surprised him, “I’m fine.”

She smiles at this, and then clicks her fingers. Banquet tables erupt out of nowhere. “Let us speak no more of war tonight,” she says. “Let us drink, and be merry, for tomorrow… the real work begins.”

*

I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised that faeries can go from bloodshed and battle to a party in the space of an hour, but it still shocks me when people start to dance over the space where Rhea’s blood was splattered. Hades disappears briefly with Apollo to toss her head into the pit, insisting it’s something he wants to do, while the remaining parts of her are prepared to be scattered across the globe, utterly unceremoniously.

“Are you crazy?” Apollo says when I ask if he has any fancy resting places marked out for the remains. “I’ve already flicked bits off the side of the mountain. Ain’t nobody finding those.”

I cringe at this, because honestly, despite everything, I still feel bad for her. I wonder if she’s truly dead, if she has a spirit drifting beneath the Styx, or if she’s as gone as Peony is.

Peony.

I raise a silent glass to her, and feel a little less bad about dismembering Rhea.

Dad appears straight after Hades vanishes, together with Diana and the healers. He hands off the child to her mother and lunges for me, and we stay that way for a very, very long time.

Then he dismisses himself to find a place to sleep. He is not a fan of parties and I don’t think he’s slept in days.

I wander to Emetria’s side. She hasn’t yet left the throne. I don’t think it’s a power thing. I think she lacks the strength to stand, but she summons the energy to smile at me. “Thought of your boon, yet?”

“No,” I tell her. “Unless… there’s a magical way to fix Hades?”

“There is,” she says. “Time.”

“Yeah, I knew you were going to say something like that.”

She smiles again, wider than before.

“I thought you didn’t want to be queen?”

“I didn’t,” she says. “I still don’t. But in that moment, I could think of no one else to do it, and if you killed her, it would have been you.”

I didn’t think of this, at the time, but now I’m grateful that she killed her for more reasons than one. It would have cleaved me away from Hades.

“If… if you don’t want to do it, you can step down.”

“And who would want it? I do not, and for that reason, it should probably be me.”

But only for a hundred years and a day. Nothing, for a faerie. She has made other, bigger sacrifices.

“Mum?”

“Yes?”

“I’m sorry about Athena.”

Her eyes mist, and she looks downwards. “Me too.”

“And…”

“Yes?”

“I love you,” I tell her, and then kiss her cheek before I can chicken out, as if I was a child again, the child she lost, the one she won’t ever really get back.

I scurry away into the throngs of people, and finally find Libby. She’s grinning, clearly drunk, and happy-exhausted.

“Hey, bestie,” she drawls.

“Hey yourself. You all right?”

“Not dead, nor does it look like I’m in danger of being so in the immediate future, which makes a shockingly present change.” She necks back her drink, and a coolness comes over her features. “Artemis asked me to join her hunters.”

“What?”

She nods. “Right after the battle. She found me, and she kissed me, and asked me to stay with her.”

“That’s amazing!”

“I turned her down.”

“What? Why?”

“I’m… I’m not ready. I want to go home and spend some time with my family and be a young adult for a while. I’m not ready to be old and young forever… or, you know, a step mum. Not yet. Even if you have forever, I think you only get one chance to be young, and I don’t want to miss it. So I asked her if the offer would still be open in a few years.”

“What did she say?”

Libby blushes. “She kissed me again, and said that she expected I would change my mind, but that she wouldn’t. That the offer would be open until I was dust.”

That seems ridiculously romantic for Artemis, but I'm happy for Libby. "That's… good. Right?"

"I think so. She asked if she could visit me in the mortal world. Might have trouble explaining to my mother why 'nice Indian boy' has been replaced with 'badass faerie woman' but we'll see. Maybe she can just be my long-distance uni girlfriend."

It's such a simple, lovely thing. We grin at each other, sticking close together until Artemis reappears having just put Diana down again, and drags Libby onto the dance floor. Everyone is smiling and laughing, and while there must be people grieving, they either hide it for the moment, or have taken themselves elsewhere.

All except Ares. He sits in a quiet corner of the room, the only person who doesn't seem to belong, in the place that was his home.

I think about ignoring him, but it's not in my nature.

"I'm sorry about…" I start, but cannot finish.

He doesn't look at me. "You can lie, and you can't even bring yourself to say that, can you?"

"No," I say, "but I'm sorry for however *you* feel."

He snorts. "Mortals are weird."

"We have our moments. And I'm *not* mortal. Not any more."

"Anyone told you how long you've got to live?"

"Why do you care?"

"Because I think my brother will be miserable without you, and for some reason that I don't fully understand, I prefer it when he's happier."

I'm not sure what to say to this, not sure I can get my head around such a strange, twisted relationship, not sure Hades shares the sentiment, not right now.

Maybe one day. Maybe one day, he'll care. They have long enough to rebuild.

I start to move away.

"You still owe me a favour," he reminds me.

"Then ask for it."

I move to the buffet table, suddenly famished. I stuff my mouth with strips of venison, soft cheeses wrapped in herbs, sharp olives, fat grapes, and tiny oatcakes. I drink a full goblet of wine.

I spy Hades returning, but before I can get to him, someone else catches my eye.

The Oracle, leaning against the buffet table.

“How did you get here?” I ask her.

She shrugs. “I asked your mother to hide me somewhere with a great view of Mount Olympus, so I’d know when everything was over. As to how I got up here? I’ve got my ways.”

I pause, waiting to see if she’s planning to elaborate.

“Ask your questions, girl queen.”

I must have a million, but suddenly everything I can ask is condensed into a tiny, vital few. I glance over at Hades, conversing easily with a group of the hunters, lighter than I’ve seen him in weeks. “Will he be all right?”

The Oracle follows my gaze. “It’ll take some time, but yes. He will.”

Something unlatches in my chest, and I utter a silent prayer. It means more coming from her than Emetria’s wishful thinking.

“What else?” she prompts.

I pause, looking at her carefully, trying to think of the best way of phrasing this. “Your ageing stops while you hold the power of prophecy, correct?”

“Correct.”

“Why did you…?”

“Why did I wait to accept my power until I was middle-aged? Why not stay young and beautiful forever?”

I nod.

“You already know.”

“I should like to hear you say it.”

She smiles. “Because you’re only young—truly young—once. If I had accepted my power back then, nothing would have been the same, afterwards. I would never be mortal again, not really. I had friends, a family—only one chance to live a life with them. But you understand that, don’t you?”

I look down. “Yes,” I say, “I do.” I glance across at Hades and smile, and he slides away from the crowd to come to my side. “Who’s your friend?” he asks.

“An oracle. Possibly the last. She’s the one who sent us on the quest.”

He bows. “My respect, and my gratitude.”

“I’ll take both.” She looks back at me. “What other questions have you got for me? I shall not tarry long.”

“No?”

She shakes her head. “These predictions shall be my last. After this, I shall give up my immortality, and return to live and die amongst my kind.”

The finality of her statement shocks me. “Why now?”

“You’ll have a hard time topping what you’ve just accomplished, and I’m not too interested in watching what comes next.”

“What *does* come next?”

She smirks. “Be more specific.”

“I… I made a deal with Valerian. A bit more chaos, with the hope of fixing the world, even if… even if a few more bad things have to happen because of it. I don’t want to know about the bad, but… but is it worth it? Will the world be better because of what I’ve done?”

The moment I’ve asked, I regret it, because I don’t know what I’ll do if she says no, how I’ll live with that kind of guilt, but it’s too late now.

“It depends on your definition of ‘better’,” she says, “but in my opinion, and the opinion of many others, yes.”

Relief floods through me, and I almost forget to ask the one, final question. The one that matters now when it didn’t before. “How long will I live?”

Hades sucks in a breath.

“You are not mortal,” she says, “neither are you fae. You shall age, but slowly. If you stay away from danger—and I predict you probably will—you have around eight hundred years to spend.”

I pause, certain I’ve misheard her.

Eight hundred years.

Eight. Hundred. Years.

I’m not certain how long faeries will live if no one kills them, but I’ve a feeling it’s not a great deal more than that.

Eight hundred years. With Hades.

Who lets out a quiet sob, and buries himself in my neck, shaking enough to make up for my complete and utter numbness.

The Oracle smiles. “Well? Anything else you’d like to know?”

I shake my head, sliding my arms around him. “I have everything I need.”

At this, she grins further. “And there will be more to come, I’m sure.” She moves past me. “Oh, one more thing.”

“Yes?”

“Your mortal half means you’re far more likely to conceive than the average fae. So… take care, children. Don’t get ahead of yourselves.”

She drifts off, leaving us both stunned. Hades is still crying into my neck.

“It’s all right,” I tell him, holding him close.

“You don’t know,” he weeps. “You don’t know how terrified I’ve been almost all of your life, knowing that I was going to have to watch you die, certain that I would outlive you. A few decades is *nothing* to us. You don’t know, you don’t know…” He holds onto me, tighter than before. “Thank you,” he breathes.

“For… my extended lifespan?”

He laughs, drawing back to wipe his nose with a black silk handkerchief. “For generally existing,” he says. “But for that too.” He grabs my hand, and steers me into a corner of the room. “Stand here.”

“What’s so special about here?”

“This is the spot I was standing on when I spoke to Emetria properly for the first time. This is where it all began. I was hiding under the tables. An apple rolled under and she followed it… I think maybe she did it on purpose, but it doesn’t matter. She offered to take me to meet you, and if I’d said no…”

“A lot of people would still be alive.”

“Maybe,” he says. “But Zera would still be queen. And maybe I wouldn’t be king of hell. Maybe Ares would be, and everything would have happened sooner and been much, much worse. *I* would be worse. I don’t want to think about a version of me without you.”

“I don’t want to think of a version of me without you, either.”

At this, his face splits into a smile, and wordlessly, he pulls me away from the room, down the winding corridors and endless archways, until we come to a bedroom far away from the hubbub. It’s plain compared to the grandeur of the rest of the palace, but half of the space is taken up by windows, displaying rolling fields of rose-gold clouds. A strange, utter warmth fills me, a peace I’d long forgotten, or never known how to feel in the first place.

“My room,” he says. “Or it was, once. There’s nothing in here that’s mine any more… except you.”

I smile, running my hands over the gilded furniture, the carved stone frames of the windows. A small notch is carved into one, a tiny arrow. “What’s this?”

His hands slide around my waist. “Hyde Park lies thousands of miles in that direction,” he tells me. “I used to sit there a lot, and think of you. I really can’t stress just how deeply I crushed on you.”

There is nothing in this room personal, and yet that notch, that proof of his feeling, remains despite everything. I pull his lips to mine, and have to stop myself from doing more, because there's still a few things to say. "I looked at the stars," I tell him. "Most nights. I pretended I was Wendy, awaiting Peter Pan. I couldn't remember you, but I think I dreamed you anyway."

He clasps my face in his hands. "Persephone," his voice is a murmur, his mouth grinning against mine.

"Yes?"

"Happy birthday," he smiles, and turns me towards the acres of soft, shimmering clouds. "Have world peace."

I try to laugh, but end up swearing. It seems utterly ludicrous to mention it with everything else happening. Hades blinks at me.

"Sorry," I say, "I just… I forgot. Long day."

"The day," Hades says, pointing out at the sun, "has only just begun."

I kiss him again, longer than before, lingering and slow. We sit on the bed, fingers bunched in each other's clothes, both shaking slightly. I can hardly believe we're here, that this is real, that we're safe.

"What now?" he asks. "What do we do next?"

"After you make passionate love to me, you mean?"

His grin is wicked. "After then, obviously."

"I… I have a plan." It's a half-formed one, made of old mortal dreams and fragile hopes. "You may not like it, though."

"Go on."

"I think I want to go back to being mortal. Or at least, pretending to be," I add hurriedly, before he can worry. "I want to go back to London and spend a bit of time with Dad, and I want to go to university still, and try new things, and learn, and do it all while I'm still, actually young, because I think Libby and the Oracle and Emetria are right, that some things are better experienced now, and… and I want you to come with me."

Hades stares at me, clasping my hands. "I'll go wherever you go," he tells me. "But the Underworld—"

"If you don't want to go, that's fine," I assure him. "If you're not ready, if you want to return to darkness and stay there, just the two of us, I'll do it. For as long as you need. For forever, if that's truly what you want. I'll do *anything* for you, now. But we can leave someone else in charge for a while. Live in the sun again. Go back one day. It can be our home again."

"Who did you have in mind?"

I cringe, not wanting to say the name. Hades registers my displeasure.

"Are you sure that's a good idea?"

"I still owe him a favour. There's no Zera to force his hand, and we can make him swear away from the gate. He might even hate it."

"Or grow so fond of it he'll never give it back."

"Like you," I say. "You've grown fond of it."

"Yes," he agrees. "It was the first place I ever felt safe, but it wasn't home until you came. *You're* home, Sephy," he says, his hand pressed against my chest. "Wherever this beats is where I want to be."

"So… what do you want to do?"

He smiles, and sinks into my shoulder. "Let's go back to the Underworld for a few months," he says. "Let's just be Hades and Persephone for a little while longer. With the dogs and the cat. Then we'll do your thing. University in September. Normal lives for a few years and then… then…"

I look up at him, but his gaze has gone to my neck. His fingers slide down my arm.

"Then?"

"Tomorrow's problem," he says. "Right now, I'd like to get back to the passionate lovemaking part of our plan. And then I'd like to sleep beside you until nightfall, and *then* I want to know what to get you for your birthday."

I kiss him, hard, pushing him back against the mattress and sliding my legs either side of his. He stares up at me, eyes bright, the flash of a soft smile resting in the corner of his cheeks. He laces his fingers into mine.

"I just want you," I tell him. "For the rest of my life. You. That's all I want."

"Your lies are exquisite," he breathes. "Come, goddess, and drown me in them."

"That is *not* a lie!"

"You will want other things, at some point."

"Maybe," I tell him, and lean down. "But I'll always want you most."

When our mouths collide this time, when his hands slide across my skin, I can imagine nothing more true, nothing more real, nothing more absolute, than the blissful and unending idea that whatever happens, we will be together for the rest of our lives.

All eight centuries of it.

One hundred years later, almost to the day, we take our current children to Hyde Park on the first of May, and wash their faces in the morning dew. My father has been gone for sixty years now, and so much of the world has changed, but this little tradition has stayed with us.

Despite the changes wrought on the world in the last century, the park remains much as it always has. The playpark is new, there are more flower beds and trees, pocket glades for weary faeries to rest in, still unseen by mortal eyes.

The bandstand is still there, freshly-painted and glowing. Our replica still stands in the gardens of the Underworld.

I swing our youngest into my arms and point to it. “Your daddy asked me to marry him, over there.”

Pip grins at this, but he’s too little to understand. I kiss his button nose and ruffle his black curls. Violet eyes blink up at me.

“Are you *still* telling that tale?”

Our eldest girl, a tall, willowy woman of nearing ninety, appears as if by magic. I had not been expecting to see her here. There’s no agreement that our eldest children join us, although several of them have over the years, dropped in on the old family tradition with their own partners and families.

Rosemary has my hair, but her father’s eyes—all three of our first ‘litter’ as Libby called them have their father’s eyes. We had them close together so they would never be alone, and were sure after they all left home that we were done and happy to be alone again.

We were not done. After a couple of decades of peace and quiet, it started to get to us. And then Artemis and Libby adopted a couple of orphaned nymph children, and the prospect of doing it again seemed mighty appealing.

“Two more,” I told Hades, “and then that’s it!”

Ten years ago we changed our minds again, and now we have two more, Aria and Pip. We’re up to seven now. Immortality offers a lot of options when it comes to family planning.

“Rosemary!” I grin

“Morning, Mother.” She kisses my cheek and wriggles her brother out of my arms to throw him in the air, and I think about how both odd and

normal it is to have my adult child beside me in this way, barely any years in appearance between us. She and all her siblings aged a little faster than most faerie babes, but in every other respect, there is little mortal about them other than their love of television and the fact I sent them all to mortal schools for a while. They will all live astonishingly long.

Hades and I did as we said we would after the war ended. We went back to the Underworld and lived there quietly, peacefully, and alone for quite some time. Hades wasn't ready to leave in September like we originally planned, so we stayed there for another year, coming back regularly to see Libby and my father, to introduce Hades to Alice, to meet Aunt Imogen's new baby and to attend Alice and Dad's wedding the following spring.

We made frequent visits to Olympus too, where Emetria and Valerian signed a new treaty and erected a council of Seelie and Unseelie alike.

I didn't help, and refused to feel guilty about that.

At the end of that year, we handed over the Underworld to the care of Zeron, and headed off to university. We stayed in London to be close to my father, renting a small flat and glamouring it to look as grand as humanly possible. We took Pandora and the dogs with us, glamouring them to look like they only had one head in the company of our mortal friends, even when they got so large they struggled to fit through the doors.

We lived like mortals for three years, tripping over one another, fighting over space, getting cross and being ordinary. I joined a theatre group. Hades learnt to play the piano and make friends, although he left the flat as little as possible and never went to social events that could be otherwise avoided.

"If we ever go to university again," he told me after three years, "we're renting a bigger place."

I was inclined to agree. We did try it again, after our first three children left home, but it wasn't the same. We felt disconnected from those around us in a way we hadn't before, knowing we were so much older, that we'd have to let the friendships fade when the lies became too hard to sit on top of. Even when you're young forever, you're only really young once.

The year after we finished university for the first time, we travelled, slowly and quietly, taking our time, dipping between the realms of mortal and faerie.

And then we went back to the Underworld.

Zeron had grown bored of the solitude by then and was all too happy to hand it over. It had lost the excitement for him years ago, especially after he

led an expedition to Tartarus to defeat the Titans and free any of the monsters unfairly imprisoned there. Occasionally, over the decades, another faerie has been exiled there, but otherwise it is a quiet existence. With the alliance between the courts, the number of soul thieves are minimal, and we make short work of anyone bold enough to try.

We take a break from our roles as monarchs every time we have a young family, raising them as relatively mortal in whatever country village takes our fancy. Charon and Medusa take over for us now, the two of them as inseparable as we are. We finally had to stop bringing the dogs with us when they reached the size of a large hippo, but we are never far away from them. Even now that their muzzles are fuzzy and grey, they still ride the kids around on their backs.

We make frequent visits between the realms, spending long, lazy summers on Mount Olympus with Emetria, now that Dad and Alice are gone.

"So," says Rosemary, calling me back to the present, "Gran's calling the big meeting soon."

The meeting to decide who will take over, now that her reign is coming to an end.

"She's going to want to pick you."

Hades groans from underneath Aria, who is currently treating him like her own personal climbing frame. "Must she? I have no wish to be king. Politics. People. Yuck."

"You just need to sit there and look pretty, Dad," Rosemary tells him. "Let Mum do all the hard work."

"Alas, pretty as I am, I promised your mother long ago we'd do the big things together. If she must suffer, so must I."

"We could always say no," I tell him. Even after all this time, I'm still not sure I'm ready. I'm still not sure I'm right for it. Maybe Artemis would be better, although she wants it even less. Maybe Diana, then. I'm not sure about Apollo. He'd turn his reign into one long party.

There's a dozen other people that might suffice, friends and allies over the years.

But maybe… maybe I owe this world. Maybe I need to do more to make it better, more than the few projects I've led over the years.

I listen to the still, quiet buzz of the city, smell the air unmarred by fuel or smog. Normal to my children, though still strange to me.

Perhaps I owe a hundred years to the ones who didn't make it, to the ones we lost along the way, to Peony, whose name hurt so much to say, that I had to wait fifty years to give it to one of my children.

What was a hundred years when I'd have six hundred afterwards?

"Would you truly hate it?" I ask Hades. "To live on Olympus again?"

At this, at least, he smiles. "A hundred years ago, yes," he says. "But now, I rather like the idea of being there with you and the children. And I *think* it's large enough for the dogs."

A thousand sunny days spent above the clouds over the years, chasing his children through the halls, have dampened the pain of his childhood. If he huddles under tables now, it's to read them stories. Life has persevered over pain, love over fear.

The last time he had a nightmare, it was about sentient cheese and a rabbit screaming about being late.

He has probably been watching too much children's television.

And he's fine.

We're *all* fine.

He glances at me, Aria hanging from his arms. Even after ninety years of parenthood, there's still a warmth in my chest whenever I see him so happy, so at ease with our children. It was a happiness I was sure would fade over the years, and never has. Each good moment he has with them is as perfect as the first, when he held Rosemary in his arms and just cried, unable to speak. She was born in the Underworld, and although Charon raced off to fetch assistance, she came early and Hades delivered her himself. Medusa, out patrolling, was most disappointed to have missed out on the action, but I thought it was perfect. Just the two of us when we divided into three.

Hades flings Aria round in his arms and she squeals with delight, a sound I wish I could capture, a sound worth everything we went through, every difficulty afterwards, every hard night. His face crinkles with laughter.

He is every bit as beautiful as the boy I met here, over a century ago, and the man I fell in love with. "Don't look too happy, wife," he says sagely. "You'll tempt fate."

"Tempt it, then," I say, freeing Pip from his big sister. "We'll weather it."

It starts to rain, and all five of us run towards the bandstand, as Westminster Tower heralds the start of a bright and glorious day.

THE END

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Other Books by this Author:

The Phoenix Project Trilogy

Book I: Flight
Book II: Resurrection
Book III: Rebirth

In the "Fey Collection" series:

The Rose and the Thorn: A Beauty and the Beast Retelling
Kingdom of Thorns: A Sleeping Beauty Retelling
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Heart of Hades: A collection of bonus scenes (subscribers only)

Coming Soon:

A Rose of Steel: Book One of the Mechanical Kingdoms Quartet

About The Author

Katherine Macdonald

Born and raised in Redditch, Worcestershire, to a couple of kick-ass parents, Katherine "Kate" Macdonald often bemoaned the fact that she would never be a successful author as "the key to good writing is an unhappy childhood".

Since her youth, Macdonald has always been a storyteller, inventing fantastically long and complicated tales to entertain her younger sister with on long drives. Some of these were written down, and others have been lost to the ethers of time somewhere along the A303.

With a degree in creative writing and eight years of teaching English under her belt, Macdonald thinks there's a slight possibility she might actually be

able to write. She may be very wrong.

She currently lives in Devon with her manic toddler in a cabin in the woods.

“Queen of Night” is her 12th novel.

You can follow her at @KateMacAuthor, or subscribe to her website at www.katherinemacdonaldauthor.com to be notified of new releases and free review copies!

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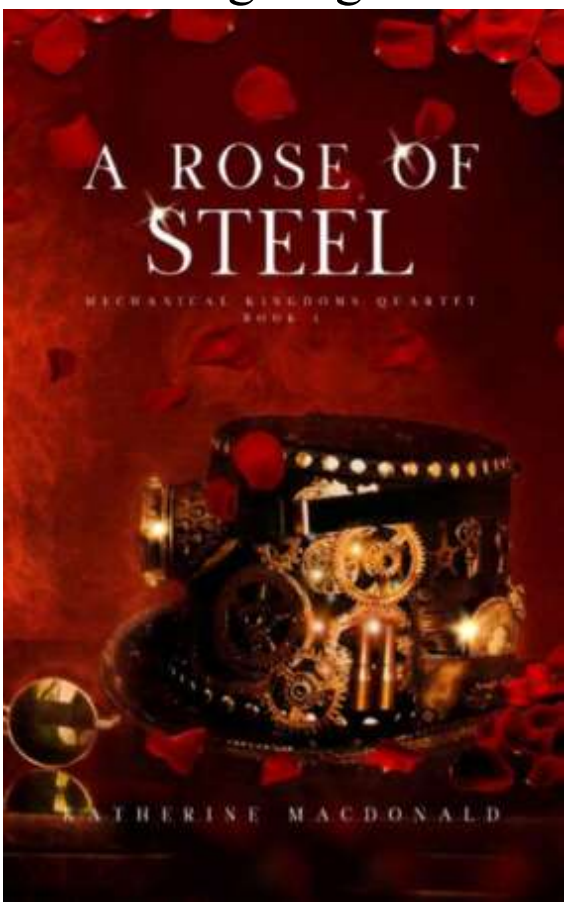

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